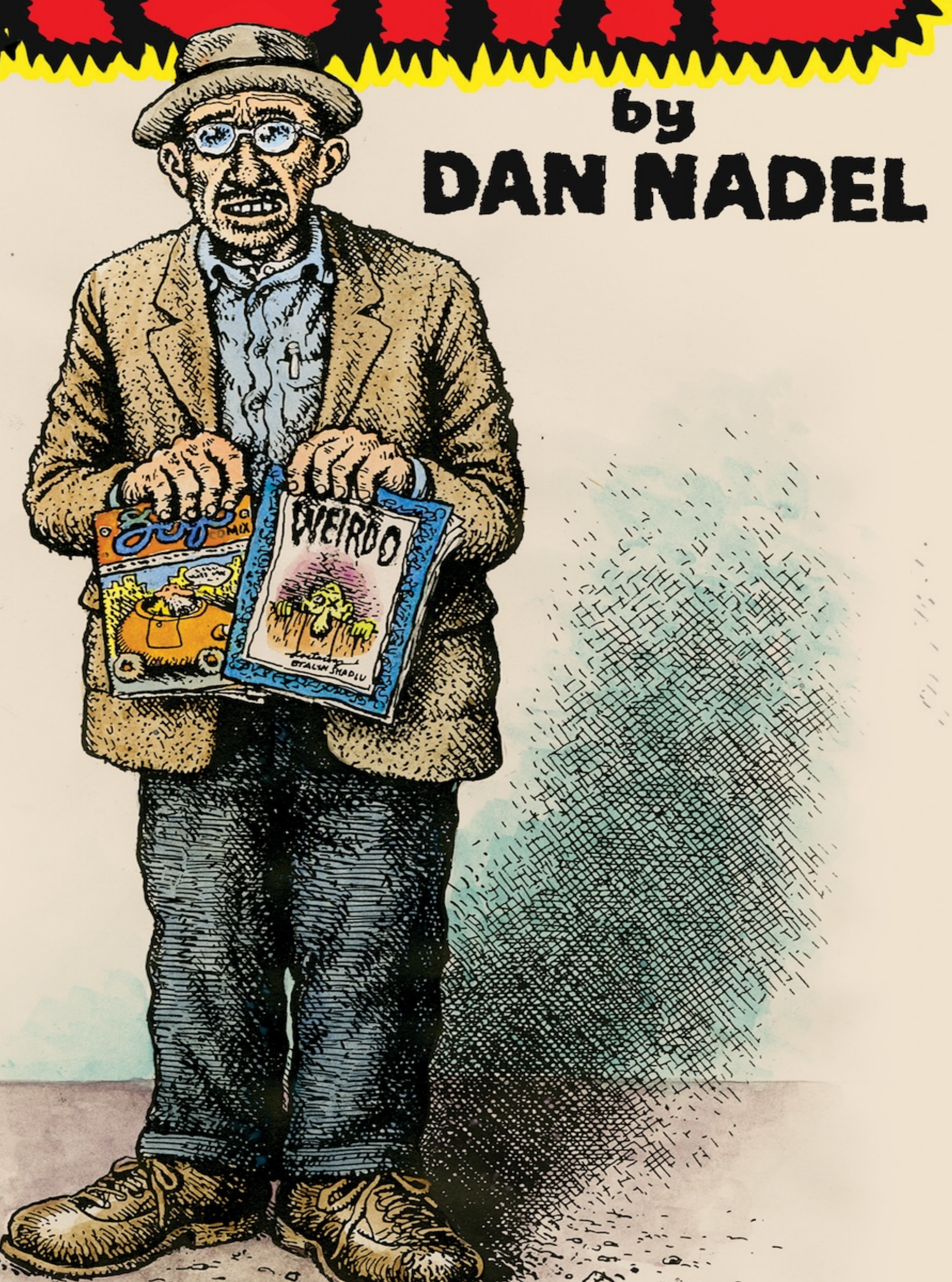
CRUMB

by
DAN NADEL


Zap Comix
WEIRDO

A CARTOONIST'S LIFE

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CRUMB

A CARTOONIST'S LIFE

Dan Nadel

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For Elisa and Henry

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All men who say yes lie.

—Herman Melville

No one understands… But of course, how could they?

—Robert Crumb

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Foreword

In late February 1968, a gaunt twenty-four-year-old Robert Crumb, gently stoned and wearing thick spectacles, a worn corduroy sport coat, and baggy trousers could be glimpsed selling his just-printed *Zap Comix* no. 1 amidst the paisley revelers grooving to the latest Doors and Rolling Stones records at an open-air party on San Francisco's Haight Street. For just 25 cents anyone could bring home a comic book filled with nine features ranging from scathing social critiques to surrealist romps to philosophical discussions to visual poetry, all drawn in a style at once familiar from their childhoods and yet unmistakably new. No one had produced anything like *Zap*, and we're still feeling its effects today.

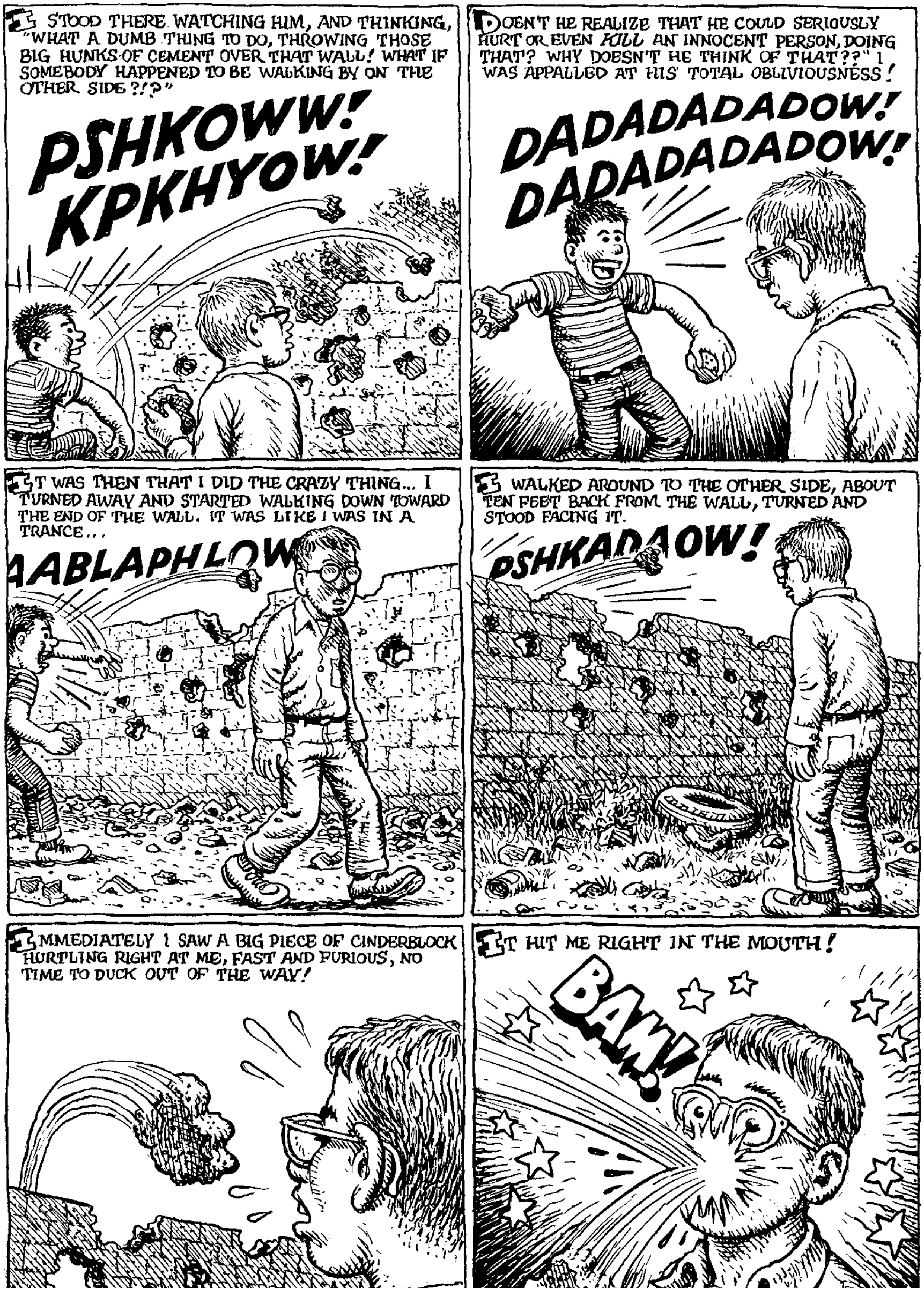
Robert's stories imprinted on an international audience just as the tidal wave of the sixties cultural phenomenon was cresting. He perfectly captured the look and feel of ecstatic LSD trips and languorous stoned afternoons as enthusiastically as he savagely pictured the racial and sexual violence that his generation sought to overcome; sparing no one, he then satirized the hippies, well-meaning liberals, and most of all himself.

If his urgent message hadn't found its moment, today's landscape of bestselling graphic novels would be impossible. There is no *Maus*, no *Persepolis*, no *Fun Home*, without his taboo-breaking, beautifully drawn, and formally inventive work. Robert's three-hundred-sixty-degree vision of America was successful because he transformed the vernacular language of twentieth-century America into an instantly recognizable popular style that he then weaponized against the culture itself. Robert's specific guttural yelp has long since placed him among the most profound and influential artists of the twentieth century and could only have come from someone born of, as he named it, "America the cruel bully; America the glutton; America the greedy; America the ugly!"

When Robert Crumb was a boy his family was the picture of the mythological mid-twentieth-century American Dream: a war hero father, a homemaker mother; three boys, two girls; a Christian lineage that stretched back to the birth of the nation. Robert would not have become "R. Crumb" if things were otherwise. He grew into an outsider, took lessons in incredulity from the ethnic and racial outsiders he idolized, but was born inside the beast, nurtured on the bloody land, indoctrinated with its foundational sins.

Trafficking in revelations about human existence for the sake of near-Platonic ideals of honesty, awareness, and moral investigation is not without its price. Throughout his life and work, Robert has repeatedly made himself a target to demonstrate an idea about human nature. He's willing and compelled to expose his darkest impulses to exemplify the male id; he risks being shunned to demonstrate the viciousness of racism. He demands we pay attention no matter the cost. This is not an entirely unselfish position.

When Robert was twelve, the Crumb family lived in Oceanside, a Southern California town near Camp Pendleton. Robert and his siblings liked to play in a nearby junkyard filled with abandoned cars, trucks, and buses. In "Don't Tempt Fate," a dense six-page comic published in 2002, Robert remembers "smashing all the glass out of the windows and dashboard dials of beautiful 1930s sedans, tearing up the upholstery and the old fiber roofs in gang orgies of destruction." As the action unfolds in each panel, Robert's adult narrative voice is drenched in disbelief: In addition to destroying cars, the boys loved to throw jagged cinder block chunks at the cinder block wall behind the junkyard, delighting as their efforts produced craters and then holes. A particularly enthusiastic neighborhood kid joined the action one day, and Robert grew concerned as the boy's projectiles sailed over the wall, endangering passersby: "'Doesn't he realize that he could seriously hurt or even kill an innocent person doing that? Why doesn't he think of that??' I was appalled by his total obliviousness."


I STOOD THERE WATCHING HIM, AND THINKING, "WHAT A DUMB THING TO DO, THROWING THOSE BIG HUNKS OF CEMENT OVER THAT WALL! WHAT IF SOMEBODY HAPPENED TO BE WALKING BY ON THE OTHER SIDE?!?"
PSHKOWW! KPKHYOW!
DOESN'T HE REALIZE THAT HE COULD SERIOUSLY HURT OR EVEN *KILL* AN INNOCENT PERSON, DOING THAT? WHY DOESN'T HE THINK OF THAT??" I WAS APPALLED AT HIS TOTAL OBLIVIOUSNESS!
DADADADADOW! DADADADADOW!
IT WAS THEN THAT I DID THE CRAZY THING... I TURNED AWAY AND STARTED WALKING DOWN TOWARD THE END OF THE WALL. IT WAS LIKE I WAS IN A TRANCE...
AABLAPHLOW
I WALKED AROUND TO THE OTHER SIDE, ABOUT TEN FEET BACK FROM THE WALL, TURNED AND STOOD FACING IT.
PSHKADAOW!
IMMEDIATELY I SAW A BIG PIECE OF CINDERBLOCK HURTLING RIGHT AT ME, FAST AND FURIOUS, NO TIME TO DUCK OUT OF THE WAY!
IT HIT ME RIGHT IN THE MOUTH!
BAM!

“Don’t Tempt Fate,” *Mystic Funnies* no. 3, 2002

Drawing himself in a mute tranc [illegible] alks around the wa and faces it. Sure enough, a chunk of cinder block pops him in the mouth, knocking out a front tooth and chipping several others. By allowing himself to be injured, Robert demonstrated the carelessness and danger of a thoughtless action. He makes himself the victim to stir the conscience of another. He also could be the Christlike martyr, taking the hit so that everyone else is safe. Or, in terms of his work, he used the total artistic freedom of underground comics, perhaps naively, to open up new avenues for artistic expression for others to build upon. Something in him wants, he’s said, to play the martyr, to commit a kind of aesthetic self-immolation, acting the exhibitionistic pervert as he exposes unthinkable truths about himself. The compulsions of masochism, sadism, and martyrdom are conjoined.

Robert is fond of writing “No one understands… But of course, how could they?” This is him as a self-regarding put-upon artiste. Sometimes he means it, in which case it’s both self-inflating and a challenge to any would-be friend or interlocutor. At other times, he uses this line to undercut himself, showing how absurd such egoism really is and bitingly demonstrating his self-awareness. He knows how normal it is that we humans feel misunderstood and isolated, and he wants us to feel some comfort in our common plight. And like an infinity loop of self-absorption, once again we’re back at Robert playing the fool for the sake of a message.

So it was not a surprise, in November 2018, when over a leisurely breakfast in his warm and gently cluttered kitchen just steps from a veranda overlooking the Vidourle River in the south of France, Robert imposed just one condition on this book: that I be honest about his faults, look closely at his compulsions, and examine the racially and sexually charged aspects of his work. He would rather risk honesty and see if anyone could understand than cooperate with a hagiography. After I promised all of that, Robert agreed to this project with a shrug: “I’m not opposed to it.”

It had taken four months, a plane ride to Paris, a three-hour train to Nîmes, and an hour-long drive from the train station to Robert’s home in Sauve to get to that shrug. I’d met him in person just once before, at a gallery dinner. An obligatory meal on Manhattan’s Upper East Side was no place for Robert Crumb. He was visibly annoyed to be there and altogether grumpy. The man I encountered in France was, eventually, quite different. Immediately upon greeting me, shoulders hunched, handshake limp, Robert performed “Crumb”: he told me that the renovations to the train station were ugly, that he doesn’t like anything modern, that he lives in the past, that he is too dyslexic to drive, and anyhow, he never wanted to learn.

After about thirty minutes without getting much of a response, he settled down; began asking about my neighborhood, job, wife, and child; and then eased into the warm, talkative, and curious man I was speaking to the next morning and whom I’ve come to know over the past six years. But his performance stuck with me. Born into a highly dysfunctional family rife with mental illness and abuse, Robert is by nature a skeptical outsider focused on maintaining a probing, independent consciousness. He has taken great pains to cultivate and preserve his interior life—sketchbooks, diaries, meditation, exercise, a healthy diet.

This has been interrupted at times by his own fate. Robert tends to say yes to most requests, like this book, and allow scenarios to play out, however messy they might become. He wants to be liked, wants to please his audience. On the other hand, he wants to maintain control. This contradiction between Mr. Nice Guy and control freak means that when things go sideways, he will disavow the project. Even if it works, he might change his mind. Remember, “No one understands… But of course, how could they?” It depends which end of Robert's ego shows up. After that initial yes, anything can happen.

And this is something Robert has experienced from all sides. He wanted to be a great and successful cartoonist. But the fame he experienced at age twenty-five in 1968 was a rude shock that upended his sense of self. He likened the experience to suddenly becoming visible after living in the shadows. The sudden interest in his life and work afforded him extravagant professional and sexual opportunities but also reinforced his certainty that people were by nature fake, users, and hypocrites. All those yes-men turned out to be liars either on paper or in his mind. He became famous again in the mid-1990s because of the film *Crumb*, but now as the oddball pervert, the weirdo from a demented family. This exposure once again fed his artistic narcissism but caused him enormous aggravation.

In the years since, he has developed well-armed defenses, as he should, and this has helped him maintain a certain humility and calm, as well as work at a consistently high level decades after most of his peers declined, publishing in 2009 a graphic novel adaptation of one of the foundational texts of western civilization: *The Book of Genesis*.

His attention to himself extends to his archive. From an early memoir written at age fifteen to his very first job offer to a thoroughly researched monthly calendar of his life that he completed at age fifty-six, his carefully kept archive has guided this story, though it has not inhibited it. He is eighty-one now, and still tending to his vision and his legacy. What follows is the story of Robert Crumb, not only as he would tell it. Though not exactly tempting fate when he agreed to this project, he's once again rounded that wall and left himself open.

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PART I

1914–1962

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CHAPTER 1

The All-Americans

Taking the hit would always be familiar to Robert Crumb. One afternoon in the spring of 1962 his mother, Bea, hurled a solid glass ashtray at his father, Chuck, who ducked. It beaned Robert, eighteen, in the forehead. Robert was bloodied and dazed, once again a silent and enraged witness to his family's chaos. Soon after, Bea took the car and disappeared for three days. When she returned to their home in Dover, Delaware, Robert found her suicide note tucked into the front seat. His parents offered no explanation, just depressed silence.

Robert was a high school graduate, a cartooning prodigy, and a thoroughly alienated introvert. Tall, rail thin, wearing Coke-bottle-thick glasses, slacks, and button-down shirts, he looked perpetually lost. He knew he had to leave home; in late June he visited a friend at Kent State University and found the college campus buzzing with activity—music, books, and most important for him, coeds. It was tantalizing but seemed so far out of reach. At home, he felt trapped in his misery. He wrote to his pal, "I've heard all that 'be yourself' stuff. When I'm myself people think I'm nuts. I'm not repelled by people. It's just that when I get around them, I lose my composure, my mind slips out of order, I become confused, nervous, I don't know what I'm doing." Not for the last time, Robert, who never learned to swim, contemplated suicide: "Things were looking terribly bleak and I was more miserable than I'd ever been before in my life. 'This is unbearable,' I thought to myself, 'I can't go on living with this terrible feeling inside of me.' So I went out walking and came to this swimming pool behind the Treadway Inn. Here, I discovered, was an ideal place to commit suicide. The pool was about twelve feet deep and filled with water. Drowning is quick and comparatively painless. I stood by the pool for about half an hour, trying to get up the courage to jump in. But deep down I knew I could never do it. I found that even with its misery and frustration, life was precious to me. Complete oblivion! The thought of it makes everything in life seem good and dear, even suffering."

And still, that summer he put off leaving home. He and his mad, brilliant older brother, Charles, walked the streets of Dover in the humidity, crickets rattling their ears. But finally, he couldn't take it anymore. In early August, Bea and Chuck were once again screaming at each other. Bea chased her husband with a knife. The shouting was interminable. On October 8 he took the ten-hour Greyhound trip to Cleveland, documenting his feelings in a diary: "Saying goodbye to mother at the terminal was a very sad affair. I was almost in tears about it. She loves me and seems to need me desperately. As she said, us kids are all she has in life. We kissed a couple of times, and I waved to her as the bus pulled out. What a tragic figure she was, standing there, waving, with her sunglasses on, and headscarf and black coat... Her and Dad were arguing violently this morning... I'm a bit frightened about what's going to become of me, leaving like this. I'm such a helpless infant—can hardly do anything for myself. Mother just showed me how to tie a necktie this morning. Sometimes I think I'm too sensitive for this fierce, competitive economic rat-race that I'm going to have to become a part of. I'm afraid it might crush me. I hope I can get a job, but not a job that has a lot of social demands and pressures. I'm not fit for something like that."

After submitting applications to a few department stores for stock clerk jobs, he reported to the Ohio State Employment Service. His only skill, he told the job counselor, was drawing. After admonishing Robert for not bringing any art samples, he phoned American Greetings, a Cleveland institution and just behind Hallmark as the nation's most popular card company. That art factory always needed extra hands, and they agreed to interview Robert. The counselor sent him on his way, saying, "This time don't forget to take along some of your work samples. Good luck!" Robert wrote to Charles: "I have one decent lead for a job… doing artwork for this pretentious greeting card company. I hope I get it, though… I'll make a lot of money and it will make this trip a success, and maybe I'll meet some art do-ers there. Who knows?" Soon Robert was on the rapid transit out to a red brick building on the west-side lakefront that once housed the White Motor Car Company and the Otis Elevator Company but now churned out paper memories. He had a short interview and reported for duty on October 22, smack in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Robert began his job at $60 a week in the training department of American Greetings. He wore his high school graduation suit and tie that first morning to work, and then every workday after for the next two years.

* * *

In 1962, Robert's branch of the Crumb family was far gone from his father's roots on a few hundred acres of land in the flat prairies of southern Minnesota near the town of New Richland. There Robert's paternal great-grandfather, John Maxon Crumb, started a farm in 1878: apple trees, fields of wheat and corn, chickens clucking around, pigs, cows, and horses. John's ancestors had moved slowly across North America from Westerly, Rhode Island, since the seventeenth century, farmers, all. It was the opposite of the rumbling trolley cars, row houses, and alleys of Robert's Philadelphia childhood. The memory of that flat, windswept place tended by God-fearing men and women would stay with Robert all his life as a reminder of a different path, an alternate life he could have had if not for his father's restless spirit.

In New Richland, one of John Crumb's sons, Winifred Maxon Crumb, though a practicing Seventh Day Baptist like all his family, married Mary Ann Chicos, a devout Catholic first-generation immigrant from Poland, and converted to her faith. Winifred and Mary Ann worked the farm, and so too did their fourteen children, among them Robert's father, Charles Vincent ("Chuck") Crumb, born in 1914. Chuck and all of his siblings held their parents in very high esteem: "Through their love and their self-discipline and their kindness," Chuck remembered, "we learned at an early age that the world is a world of reality and if we want something, we've got to work for it. And if we want something to last, we have to take care of it and really, there's no-one else who's going to hand you an easy life." He recalled Mary Crumb primarily as a farmer's wife and a mother, fundamentally concerned with the tasks of keeping her family alive, healthy, and working: "I guess she was never happier than when she was making something, or patching something, for someone to wear that would keep out the cold and make them more comfortable."

Winifred Maxon Crumb, a silent, equanimous man, possessed great physical and moral authority. Chuck would often retell an incident from his boyhood: Though we was specifically warned to keep a very careful eye on a pair of horses, they escaped under his watch. Winifred evenly asked his son if he'd left them alone despite his instructions otherwise. That question was enough for the boy to feel severely punished: his was a failure not just of duty but of morality, too. He hadn't obeyed his father and now the lives of the animals and the livelihood of his family were endangered. But it was Winifred's leveling moral gaze that truly punished Chuck. Robert inherited the Crumb family's unflagging work ethic and strict morality, one not only of external consequences but of internal examination. Chuck wondered if his failing meant his character was flawed; later, his son Robert would expend hundreds of pages on meticulous accountings of the moralities of himself and those around him.

In 1931, Chuck graduated from Freeborn High School and then studied teaching at New Richland Normal School and Mankato State Teachers College. From 1934 to 1936 he taught junior high school history, science, and literature in Freeborn County. Inspired by the writer Jack London, he nursed a desire to be a novelistic chronicler of the American Midwest. He wanted to see the world, and at the time the United States Marine Corps offered an ostensibly safe all-expenses-paid trip around the globe. What could go wrong? Mary knew that the Marines was not for adventure but for violence: she wept as he blithely left. Chuck enlisted in 1936 and was bound for Shanghai in 1937, where the newly appointed Private Crumb joined the First Battalion, Fourth Regiment protecting the International Settlement, a then-endangered remnant of Western colonialism. And while Japan and China had been in conflict since 1931, the settlement was mostly left alone.

While Chuck was fleeing the midwestern nest, across the country in Philadelphia his future wife, and Robert's mother, Beatrice Hall, was having her first child. If the Crumbs were model white Americans, then the Halls were the equally clichéd opposite: degenerate urbanites. The Crumbs of Minnesota maintained a healthy family tree nourished by family reunions and, these days, Facebook. The Halls, by contrast, virtually disappear in midcentury. Their tree is full of broken branches and burls.

Beatrice Hall was born in 1920 in Milford, Delaware, to Robert's grandparents, Joseph Meachum Hall and the former Viola Jackson. The Halls and Jacksons both track back to eighteenth-century Chester, Pennsylvania, a manufacturing town just southwest of

Philadelphia along the Delaware River. Joe Hall, born in 1880, was most interested in playing banjo, guitar, and mandolin; he lived his entire life in West Philadelphia working, like his father before him, in the city's lively printing industry, first as a typesetter and then as a pressman. In 1903, he married a woman named Edith, and together they had a son, Gordon. By the end of the 1910s, he and Edith had split and she and Gordon disappeared from his life. Neither left a trace. Joe was single and living alone when he met Viola Jackson.

Here things become gnarled. Viola was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, in 1899, but seems to have arrived in Joseph's neighborhood in the 1910s. The rest of the Jacksons relocated south to Milford, Delaware, a modest hub for shipbuilding and agriculture. The soon-to-be unhappy couple met sometime at the end of the 1910s, likely through music—Viola, a boisterous self-described flapper with a lifetime of alcoholism ahead of her, played piano and sang; her younger brother, Frank A. Jackson, was a multi-instrumentalist who would later lead the popular Philadelphia band Jackson and His Rhythm Boys. Joe was known as quiet and retiring, but he occasionally performed in vaudeville pit bands; for a time in the 1920s he played in a group later known as the Uptown String Band. Perhaps it was a dance hall romance, but likely Viola became pregnant, forcing the marriage in 1919. She was twenty and Joe thirty-eight. The following year Robert's mother, Beatrice Hall, was born, soon followed by two baby boys.

The family lived in a rooming house in West Philadelphia. Their working-class, mixed-race neighborhood of row houses serviced the manufacturing industries in the city. On weekends, Joe, Frank, and Viola would play popular songs of the day, sometimes with friends joining in; on summer nights their neighborhood was alive with small groups playing music on the front porches of their row houses. Joe opened a short-lived grocery store and then returned to printing, training Frank as well, but was unable to earn enough money to move his family into their own home. Beatrice, who grew to hate her mother and forever romanticized her father, remembered Viola drunkenly shouting at Joe about his failures, at which point he would retreat to their bedroom, close the door, and play his mandolin. Apparently fed up with Joe's inability to provide enough for his family during the depths of the Depression, Viola took the then-unusual step of divorcing him in 1931. He never recovered from the split, descending into depression and isolation. In 1940, Joe was self-employed and living above a shoeshine storefront, and in 1944, just a year after Robert was born, he died of unknown causes in a rooming house in Philadelphia.

In 1934, Viola married Phil O'Connell, a widower and father of three children. Phil, who lived just six blocks east, was a local plumber with a steady income, known around the neighborhood as solid in business and explosive in temperament. He was a financial life raft for Viola and her three children. Bringing six kids together under one roof was not an easy transition. The house was loud, chaotic, and booze fueled. Beatrice remembered, perhaps with exaggeration born of resentment, being forced to do all the housework, Viola slamming her head against a wall if it wasn't done well and promptly. One of Beatrice's brothers remembered his mother punishing him for stealing by holding his hand over a burner. The low ceilings, tiny warren of rooms, and claustrophobic streets bred violence, alcoholism, low-level criminal activity, and loose sexual behavior.

Money was tight in those Depression years, especially for such a large brood, and so both Beatrice, now going by "Bea," and her eldest stepbrother, Phil Jr., dropped out of school after eighth grade, she to work in a steam laundry and then a diner, he to be an apprentice plumber. Unmoored from a teen or school community of their own, Bea, age fourteen, and Phil Jr., age thirteen, found solace in a sexual relationship. From their secret trysts soon came a child named Catherine, born in the summer of 1935. Bea was fifteen and Phil Jr. fourteen. They said they were in love and wanted to be together, to raise their daughter as a couple in another city, perhaps hoping for a stable family unit of their own. This was impossible. Despite Viola and Phil Sr.'s desperate attempts to keep the whole affair a secret, wild rumors of incest and rape spread from house to house. The staunchly Catholic neighborhood was outraged. The taunts and slurs hurled at all members of the O'Connell family were so virulent that both of Phil Jr.'s younger siblings were sent away from home for the remainder of their childhoods. In an attempt to quell any future rumors and reclaim some respectability, Viola and Phil Sr. told any newcomer that Catherine was in fact their daughter—Bea's half sister—a happy accident for the aging couple.

In a late 1930s photograph Catherine stands hand in hand with her biological parents, Phil Jr. and Bea, at a fairground. Phil Jr. looks like a cocky young man; Bea appears a bit wan, eyes staring into the middle distance. Her heart was broken, she'd been publicly humiliated in her small community, and her first love had been forbidden. She was only a teenager but had known only chaos in her family life: her father vanished, an illegitimate daughter hidden, and a mother who never missed a chance to demean her.

Phil Jr. was said to be genuinely in love with his stepsister but was forbidden by his father to continue the relationship. He enlisted in the US Navy, served in World War II, and sent money to Catherine until she married in 1956. At that point, Phil Jr., having honored his commitment to his daughter and to Bea, cut off all contact with the O'Connells, Catherine, and Bea. He married, had two children in the 1960s, but never told them of their half sister. Bea also kept the secret, naming Catherine an "aunt" to Robert and his siblings until Catherine blurted out the truth in the late 1950s. Even then the truth was never discussed. This shame was profound and lasting; Viola's

1976 obituary listed Catherine as her daughter. Robert would later refer to this side of his family as “urban, a bit lumpen, dissolute, alcoholic, degenerate. Sexual weirdness, all that stuff.” All that “stuff” included a concealed half sister, a divorce, domestic violence, a belittled grandfather, and a domineering matriarch—the material that built Robert’s worldview.

By 1940 Bea, still living at home caring for Catherine, had a job at a diner in downtown Philadelphia. It was an hour-long trolley commute from home, and she complained that Viola confiscated her wages. There she met Chuck Crumb. In those years of family tumult in West Philadelphia, Chuck was in Shanghai with the US Marines. In July 1937, after a period of relative calm, warfare broke out between the Japanese and the Chinese—shelling and shrapnel decimated the citizens of Shanghai. What began in Chuck’s mind as a lark became a horror: the fighting was so gory, so deadly, and so utterly unexpected that three hundred thousand people died in just three months in what later became known as “Stalingrad on the Yangtze.” Perhaps the constant horror inured Chuck to the sights—it certainly didn’t diminish his enthusiasm for the Marine Corps. Chuck was a young man looking for adventure, perhaps material for a future novel, and from his descriptions of himself, however self-mythologizing, he perceived himself as some kind of seeker.

Chuck landed back in California in July of 1939, and a year later became a recruiting warrant officer sergeant for the Marines at the newly built US Custom House in downtown Philadelphia. There he spoke to dozens of recruits each day, presenting a focused, clipped demeanor, taking his lunch breaks around the corner at the diner where Bea waited tables. She took a liking to the tall, handsome, straight-backed Marine with a strong sense of purpose. Their courtship was brief and passionate, resulting in a surprise pregnancy. Their late-1940 wedding was presided over by a justice of the peace. Only after their first child, a daughter named Carol, was born, in April 1941, were they married (again) in a Catholic church, where the couple posed for a photograph. Bea stands smiling in white pumps, at ease in a festive blue dress, buttons down the front, one white-gloved hand holding a bouquet, and the other on her husband's uniformed shoulder. Chuck is seated at attention, his smile too wide to be natural, his eyes staring far into the distance. The young couple moved into a West Philadelphia house not far from the O'Connells and briefly settled into family life. Their second child, Charles Jr., was born in 1942, and Robert in 1943. But with America at war, Chuck wanted to get back into action. He was assigned to the Fleet Marine Force in late 1943, completed officer training school in Quantico in 1944, stopped back home long enough to conceive a fourth child with Bea, and then shipped out to the Pacific. Bea, sensing a long haul ahead, shipped herself and the kids to the Crumb farm in New Richland, Minnesota, so she could get some help with her four children under the age of four. She knew well enough that her childhood home was neither on offer nor a good place to raise a family.

From mid-1944 to early 1946 Chuck was in the Pacific Theater. He fought in one of the bloodiest conflicts of the war, the Battle of Saipan, and in 1945 he was part of the amphibious assault on Okinawa—the last major battle of World War II, and another bloodletting. With a chest festooned with medals, the Purple Heart among them, in late 1945 Charles returned to New Richland and his young family. Like many soldiers, Chuck was loath to discuss what he saw and did. He returned home hardened, transformed by his experiences from a wide-eyed wanderer to a traumatized realist. Their time on the farm had been good to Robert and his siblings. He and his older brother, Charles, learned to draw from their aunt Katie and found warmth and peace in the quiet demeanor of their midwestern relatives. But Bea, while appreciative of the Crumb hospitality, was starved for city life, and perhaps missed Catherine, too. And so in early 1946, Chuck, his brother Mac, and their father, Winifred, piled Bea and the kids in a car and drove straight through to Philadelphia. Mac and Winifred didn't stay in the godforsaken place even a night before zooming back to New Richland.

By the end of 1946 Chuck and Bea were the parents of five children: Carol, age five; Charles Jr., four; Robert, three; Maxon, two; and the newborn Sandra. Upon his return to the United States Chuck was discharged from the Marines but quickly signed up for an additional two years through a program that offered a bonus for reenlisting. The Crumbs were back in West Philadelphia, first just around the corner from the O'Connells, and then in a modest rental house on South Fifty-Third Street, just a block east of the Market Street Elevated Line in a noisy and congested row thrumming with the motion of trolleys and trains.

The neighborhood was mostly Italian and Irish working-class, though Black people were moving in, battling redlining and more directly violent attempts to contain them in North Philadelphia. Viola, a vehement racist, bitterly complained and the O'Connell men smashed the windows in Black homes to discourage integration. Robert's maternal uncles were "tough, hard-drinking working class men, full of anger, capable of turning mean all of a sudden… they'd be laughing, and slapping each other on the back and hugging each other in a lurching sort of way one minute, and the next you'd hear the sound of a bottle smashing on the ground or against a wall, shouts and curses, the heavy thud of adult bodies falling against the wall or some furniture knocked over. We tended to steer clear of these family gatherings…. We would split the scene [and] come home many hours later to find some of them passed out on the floor or the couch or someplace."

Splitting the scene became a ritual for Robert and his older brother, Charles, in the ever-changing cities, neighborhoods, and houses the family would inhabit in its slow roll to disintegration. Home was never settled, always teetering, sometimes exploding. Having a long ramble was a chance to find some freedom, process events, and seek new sights and sounds. Robert's earliest memories were gathered during these few years on South Fifty-Third Street. As for many families, the radio was a primary source of culture, and it provided Robert's first exposure to recorded music. Bea tuned in to whatever was popular, songs like "Open the Door, Richard!," "Cement Mixer," and "Pistol Packin' Mama"; polka sets for Philadelphia's large German and Eastern European populations were a special favorite.

In early 1947, after just over a year at home getting to know his wife and five children, Chuck volunteered to ship out to the US Navy's Western Pacific Fleet off the coast of Tsingtao, China. The US was ostensibly there as a show of force to support Chiang Kai-shek's government against the threat of communism. At home Bea had some help from her brother Joe Hall Jr., who Robert remembers spanking him hard with a hairbrush and generally being cranky with the unruly brood. Bea loved her kids but didn't know how to be a parent. She could be goofy, funny, and loving. Almost giddily naive in her affection, but also confused, overbearing, and remote. She'd given up her first child, had suffered the scorn of her neighbors, and had escaped Viola's hand, but she lived in constant fear of abandonment and deprivation—a feeling Chuck did little to alleviate.

Chuck returned to Philadelphia in May 1948 with a trunk full of teakwood bowls and cups, toy airplanes and battleships, a samurai sword, and other loot; his tour was uneventful. A year later the

People's Liberation Army took Tsingtao—one more "domino" in the early days of the Cold War. Chuck was back for good now, but to what? He and Bea had lived together for only half of their seven-year marriage, conceived five children, and occupied four different homes. Like many GIs after the war, Chuck was grim, rudderless, and angry. No war to fight, no place to go, no brotherhood: just a houseful of kids and a wife whose youth was fading and who was showing herself to be mentally unstable. She had already had two self-described "nervous breakdowns"—one in which she fell on the floor screaming, and another in which a kitchen drawer full of cutlery fell to the floor, setting her off—and sought treatment for her anxiety and depression. Chuck also grew to detest his rowdy, undisciplined in-laws, particularly Viola, whose impertinent cruelty he could not abide. But Bea, while ambivalent herself, needed help with the children, so Bea's daughter, "Aunt Catherine," now a teenager, would frequently babysit.

Violence in the surrounding streets and in the home was fairly normal. On Christmas Day 1948, Robert, age five, opened a gift—a plastic ukulele! Just what he wanted. Unfortunately it was intended for his younger brother Maxon, so he flung it to the floor, breaking its neck. Chuck roared, Robert was ordered upstairs to his bedroom, his father in pursuit, striking him as he climbed. Robert tripped and fell hard against the wall, breaking his collarbone. Bea and Chuck took him to the naval hospital and claimed that he'd fallen down the stairs in a burst of holiday excitement. "'You know how kids are on Christmas morning,'" Robert remembers Bea saying to the doctor. "My father left the lying to my mother."

If Robert's injury wasn't deliberate, Charles's were: enraged by what he saw as his first son's inborn physical failures and consistent provocations, Chuck berated and beat Charles so badly that sitting was painful for days afterward. Bea disapproved of Chuck's punishments as well as his continued employment in the Marines but had little leverage. “Things went bad in our family in the late forties,” Robert remembered. “We used to wish they’d get the goddamn divorce they were always threatening to get, but it was probably a good thing for us that they didn’t since our mother would most likely have gotten custody of us, and then she very likely would have gotten involved with some man even worse than our father, who, harsh as he was, at least wasn’t a psycho and did always provide for us—food on the table, enough clothes to wear, decent roof over our heads.” Chuck and Bea had each married an illusion: the upright all-American Marine and the sassy urban dame. Now both images were fading into a much different reality.

Chuck always provided, but he wasn’t quite sure how. He’d been in and out of the Marines for nearly his entire adult life, but he was still just a grunt. He reenlisted again, this time in a secretarial position as an assistant to various officers (security, intelligence officer, chemical warfare radiological safety) at the Depot of Supplies in Philadelphia, where weapons components were logged and shipped west. Attempting to save some money and perhaps get some distance from the O’Connells, Chuck relocated the family to a housing project on the south edge of Philadelphia near the railroad tracks that ran alongside the Schuylkill River. To the south enormous oil refineries hugged both sides of the river. The navy yard was to the east, where Chuck would take the kids to see vast expanses of junked World War II airplanes stripped for parts and intended for the scrapyard. The idea of surplus American mass production bound for oblivion, deservedly and not, stuck with the Crumb boys and fascinated Robert in particular.

Charles found his own amusements: throwing “clinkers” (burned-out coal chunks) from the railroad embankment at the windows of passenger trains. This could have been simply a case of childhood mischief if other signs weren’t surfacing: “Once,” Robert remembered, “he picked up a still smoking cigarette off the sidewalk and stuck the lighted end into the bellybutton of a fat little Italian girl who lived around the corner. The girl screamed bloody murder until her mother came running out of her front door and went storming down the alleyway to our house, and she and our mother had a big shouting match about it, the big fat Italian lady yelling up at my mother, who yelled back at her from an upstairs back window."

A more benign distraction became the center of the Crumb household in the late 1940s: a television. The box then was awash in entertainment pulled from radio shows and old vaudeville acts. Television held the past but promised the future, soothing the jangled nerves of young vets and selling them the latest consumer goods. Families suddenly weren't strumming chords on their porches, they were staying inside to watch every genre available: soon-to-be-classic comedy by longtime pros in Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre* and *The Colgate Comedy Hour* with Eddie Cantor; children's programming that combined popular fads with a wholesome and homemade sensibility, like *It's Howdy Doody Time* and *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*; variety shows, such as *Toast of the Town*; and detective dramas, like *Man Against Crime*. In front of the TV their world expanded, and soon Charles felt a particular spark of creative energy.

In September 1949 Robert entered first grade at St. Richard's Catholic School, where a "very heavy Catholic indoctrination" began. He believed the priests were speaking directly to God, that Jesus had died for his sins, and that he needed to be good in mind and body or else go straight to hell when he died and suffer for all eternity. Authority was to be obeyed at all times. He was made to wear a starched white shirt and necktie every day, learned his prayers, kept mute the pain of his knees on the hardwood pew in the basement church, and imbibed the Holy Trinity, all of which left him as fearful as he was faithful. He prayed to God every night until he was sixteen, terrified of divine justice, only feeling absolved when he received communion. Charles was so devout that he sometimes walked around with pebbles in his shoes in imitation of his favorite saint, Francis of Assisi, whom he used to quote as saying "I'm not a man, I'm a worm."

In an irony Robert would only grasp later, his father was an atheist and his mother completely disinterested in religion. The family attended church every Sunday to be sociable and sent the Crumb children to Catholic school because Chuck believed it instilled the strongest discipline. He had a special respect for nuns—his sister Katie, who taught Charles and Robert to draw back in New Richland, now wore the habit, and he spoke admiringly of the wartime heroism of nuns. Robert's nuns were not there to minister to his injuries, but rather to shame and punish him. He tried hard to please the sisters and be a good Catholic boy but felt it was futile. The disconnect between the doctrine and his daily reality "was an impairment," he later wrote, "to the development of confidence in [his] ability to reason and cope intelligently with the world." He added, "A Catholic school education means spending large amounts of time and energy later struggling against the damage done to one's mind, and that's only if you become aware of it at all. In my childish innocence I believed everything the sisters taught. I needed to be a good boy to avoid going to hell." Never a good student, and struggling with undiagnosed dyslexia, Robert was not terribly well liked by his teachers. He experienced a special injustice when his first-grade teacher hit him with a ruler for being unable to read the blackboard. Terrified, Robert screamed that he couldn't *see* the blackboard. Finally, his eyes were tested, and he was fitted for glasses. The trouble was that he could perceive neither distance nor depth. Until then, he'd felt his way through the world bumping into corners and walls, and his parents just thought him clumsy. He had to consciously figure out the spatial dynamics that we normally intuit. The shapes he saw in space were a bit blurry and lacking any interior details, which gave him a great feel for the forms of the iconography around him. Having taught himself to see depth, when he began drawing, Robert was able to carry this conscious knowledge over to the page. If given an assignment to draw a ship on the ocean, most kids would draw the icon of a boat atop a horizon line. At age six, Robert impressed Bea by rendering a ship cutting through the water, its bow looming large, and the rest of the hull receding back into the page.

In August 1950 the family moved again, this time to Ames, a small college town in the middle of Iowa. Chuck became an instructor in the Navy Reserve Officers Training Corps at Iowa State University, which also hosted US defense projects. Bea took a job canning corn at a factory. In Iowa Chuck hoped for some stability, maybe some quiet and relative peace. Seemingly plunked down in the middle of nowhere, the Crumb siblings huddled ever closer to each other and clung to a new obsession: comic books. Bea was supportive when the kids began stacking up comic books, even taking the boys to newsstands and bringing home new issues from the grocery store to feed their habit. Unlike parents who decried the effects of the medium on growing minds, Bea and Chuck had no cultural aspirations or pretensions, kept no books besides the essentials for school, and were open to nearly anything that kept the kids busy.

* * *

The late 1940s and early 1950s were the tail end of an enormous boom in comic books. The format itself evolved throughout the 1930s, eventually finding a popular audience at the end of the decade thanks to the success of Superman. Seeing a new market of children, teens, and enlisted men, publishers pushed superheroes, science fiction, adventure, crime, film, and funny animal characters onto newsstands. This new market required a fresh labor force to write and draw stories. With top talents making good money in newspaper comic strips and magazine illustration, comic books fell to teenagers, also-rans, eccentrics, and moonlighting animators. Of the hundreds of titles published monthly by over two dozen publishers, most were forgettable, some were fascinatingly strange, and a few were ambitious for the medium itself. Many readers latched on to all-powerful beings like Captain Marvel or stoic detectives like Batman. The confidence and machismo of comic book heroes was, after all, closest to the American self-image. But the Crumb brothers resented brutish do-gooders solving problems with fisticuffs. Superman was hardly an idol to them—he was more like their drunk uncles and local bullies. Their goofy, cerebral, and clannish sensibility was more akin to the animal and humor comics in *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories, Little Lulu*, and *Pogo* comic books, all released by Dell, one of the finest comic book publishers of the twentieth century.

The company's motto, "Dell comics are good comics!," meant "good" for the kiddos, as against the bang-up action and adventure titles that might lead impressionable noggins astray. For the men drawing the comic books, Dell paid reasonably well and offered a modicum of respectability that attracted cartoonists who could see the potential in a vast readership and ready-made vehicles. Nearly all the Dell comic books were licensed properties—Disney, Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, Popeye, Tarzan, and other family-friendly characters, which, by contractual agreement, were written and drawn anonymously. *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* sold an astonishing two million copies a month in the late forties, far exceeding the monthly sales of superheroes, crime, and romance comics. Among Mickey Mouse and Goofy yarns, this title included some of the very best comics ever published: Donald Duck (and later

Uncle Scrooge) stories written and drawn by a former Disney story man named Carl Barks. In keeping with the Dell policy, Barks never signed his work, but fans came to recognize the touch of the man they called “the Good Duck Artist,” whose comics from 1942 to 1968 had pathos, cynicism, visual depth, and richly delineated characters. Barks thought of his characters as “humans who looked like ducks.” He used highly recognizable ciphers so that he could tell the stories that entertained him and his readers. Barks was something of a realist: even when he took his ducks to the Andes, they still had to conform to their character traits and the laws of physics. This practice maintained a consistent baseline for artist and audience alike. And Barks had range: from slapstick one-pagers to incidental stories of ten or twelve pages, to epic adventure stories that ran as long as thirty-two pages.

The December 1948 *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories*, in which Barks has Donald sign up for a radio quiz show, inadvertently exposing its inanity and the average citizen’s greed, was a fixture in the Crumb home. In 1952, Robert and Charles both hand-copied the story, substituting their own characters for Barks’s ducks. Still later, Robert would marvel at Barks’s storytelling discipline. Each plot turned on how these highly individual characters interacted with the world. Barks imbued them with psychological and emotional depth and then carried these traits to their logical ends. But the narrative never overtakes the individual drawings: his panels and pages are impeccably composed micro and macro beats in his propulsive stories.

Pogo by Walt Kelly (another Disney alumnus), which Robert discovered in comic book form in 1953, envisioned all of society and current events within a small village called Okefenokee Swamp populated by animals with distinct points of view. Kelly drew Pogo first in comic books and then in comic strips and accompanying books from 1941 to 1972, to great acclaim. Kelly’s work was similar to the dialogue-heavy ensemble comedy then becoming nationally popular through Jack Benny and Fred Allen—it was rooted in the collision of oddball characters bumping against each other to spark incidents and plots. Kelly also laced in satire, a leftist critique of industry, and a sense, as in Barks, that animals could be all too human. He was also deeply invested in rendering lush settings as distinctively as his characters. A primary inspiration for Kelly, as for Robert, was late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century graphics, especially the complex compositions and intricate crosshatched images of late nineteenth-century life by the great political satirist Thomas Nast.

Little Lulu, by another former animator, John Stanley (also required to remain anonymous), chronicles the wiseass adventures of a tough little girl in a nameless postwar, pre-suburban neighborhood. Stanley, like Kelly, kept his settings limited, but his drawings were spare as well, rendering Lulu and company in just a handful of straight lines and curves. This was no-frills cartooning by an artist whose view of the world was somewhat dark: misadventures were necessary, grown-ups rarely understood, and Lulu had to push, scheme, even bully a bit, to get her way. It was her against the world. And like Barks, Stanley kept to consistent rules: the characters were usually seen in full figure, in generalized versions of Depression-era homes and streets that never changed during his 1945–59 run on the title.

All three cartoonists were approaching the medium with the rigorous attention to story beats, body language, and setting that animation demands, but adapted to panel-based storytelling. Which is to say, a careful balance of dialogue, characterization, drawing, and a line that swings, but not too hard—just enough to keep the story moving along. In doing so they created distinctive, rich stories far beyond what might be expected in a comic book about a little girl or a talking possum. These beautiful, transporting, and subversive stories are structural models for what Robert would do later. All have the texture of real experience and of a voice speaking through the characters—a voice recognizable to the Crumb brothers and a handful of other kids around the country who would, just a few years later, seek out these artists and form the nucleus of comic book fandom.

By 1952 Carol, age eleven; Charles, age ten; Robert, age eight; Maxon, age seven; and Sandra, age six, were all making their own books and comics modeled on anthology comics featuring different characters drawn by multiple artists, just like *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, using Mickey Mouse and other animated favorites. Moving homes so often meant that the kids became their own social group, and comics their primary activity. Charles, always obsessive and domineering, drove his siblings to produce enough pages to fill twenty-page comics each month. A decade later, Robert and Charles wrote about these days in the voice of a narrator recounting an important historical development: "Why [the Crumbs] chose cartoons over regular art is hard to say. They had plenty of comic books which they devoured eagerly, but so did most kids of this same period, when the cartoon field was its best, at least animated cartoons were, which they seemed to prefer over serious comic-type art."

As much control as he exerted over his siblings, everywhere else Charles was spinning out. He was at once paralyzingly fearful of the outside world and strikingly cavalier. Charles was isolated, teased as "nutty" by the neighborhood kids, and, unusually in those postwar years, had already visited a psychiatrist a few times by the age of seven. In the absence of anything formal, the casual diagnosis was that he was a mama's boy who needed more discipline. But there was menace, too. On one of their walks around Ames, Iowa, Charles and Robert wound up at a motel court outside of town. Deliberately in full view of the owner, Charles began plucking empty Coke bottles from a rack and smashing them on the ground. The proprietor burst out of his office and chased the boys deep into a cornfield, Charles laughing and taunting the man as they played hide and seek amidst the tall stalks.

The puppet shows on television that transfixed Charles, including *Howdy Doody* and *Foodini the Great*, employed theatrical devices, along with Depression-era performers and slang. These entertainments seemed within reach to a young boy. So, just as he'd once recolored and decorated his toys, he set out to make his own puppet shows. He formed his hands into shapes and, with the streetlamp for light, cast shadows against his bedroom wall to make puppet shows for an audience of one. From this lonesome activity came his first character, Ally Alligator, and then, with just two fingers, Fuzzy the Bunny. The following year, Disney released *Cinderella*. Charles wrote a decade later, "Walt Disney productions had a great influence on me and are probably 75% responsible for my attempt at cartooning." The Disney empire had incubated his favorite cartoonists and, on film, produced an entirely believable world full of rigorously ordered beauty and terror. Good was good, evil was evil. Those fluid, curvaceous forms were a respite for millions of children across the world, becoming the lingua franca of postwar childhood. In September 1950 Charles drew his first Fuzzy the Bunny story for a class assignment, and did so again at every opportunity. Around this time, he started his own original handmade comic book series, *Animal Town Comics*, featuring Ally Alligator and his nephew, Nicky; Chicky Chick; the birds Mopsy and Flopsy; Fuzzy the Bunny; Blackie Crow; and Ma Hen. Inspired by Walt Kelly's features in *Animal Comics* and Carl Barks's in *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories, Animal Town Comics* was Charles's private universe rendered in pencil on notebook paper, sometimes colored with crayon, folded to five and a half by eight inches and bound with staples.

Then it was Robert's turn: by January 1951 he finished an entire sixteen-page issue of *Diffy in Shacktown*, featuring Diffy the Mouse and Brombo the Panda. Robert was just a year younger but utterly in thrall to his domineering, slightly dangerous brother: "I always liked to draw but he made me draw comics. I just had to draw comics. If I didn't, he said I was worthless. He'd constantly ask if I had the latest issue done, and remind me of the spin-off bimonthly or the upcoming Christmas annual. I would often work fast just to fill the pages. And then he would scold me for sloppiness and illegibility. He shamed me constantly. He was so powerful. His vision was so strong. Once he got me on it, there was no getting off it. I was set on that track like a trolley car. Other than drawing I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even tie my shoes. I didn't know how to cope with life at all. I was fearful, I was uncoordinated, socially inept. And the other siblings of mine, they kind of tried to do comics, but they didn't succeed as well as I did. Charles was a storyteller. I'd be lying in bed at night and I'd say, 'What are you thinking about?' He'd say, 'I'm thinking of a plot for a story.' I never did that. I never thought of plots for stories."

In November 1951 Charles began drawing *Chuck Crumb's Funny Friends*, a monthly sixteen-page comic book featuring Fuzzy the Bunny and others. It lasted eighty or ninety issues, up into the late 1950s. Robert also began a monthly sixteen-page comic, *Brombo the Panda*, which ran from 1952 to 1958. The other siblings started their own monthly comic books, of varying ambition and duration: Carol drew *Funny Funnies* with Campfire Clown, Maxon drew *Dizzy Wizzy* with Jerry the Octopus, and Sandra drew *Black-Eyed Susan* featuring Nosy and Tommy Tulip. These comics were produced under the auspices of the Animal Town Comics Club, "an organization to discuss problems, ideas, questions, concerning homemade comic books." Charles was the president, Robert the vice president, Carol the secretary, Sandra the treasurer, and, to his eternal resentment, Maxon the supply boy. They drew on their bedroom floor hunched over sheets of paper laid on an old coloring book for support, their supplies in coffee cans and cigar boxes. They included subscription offers, just like the published comics. The kids showed these booklets to their classmates but there wasn't a grand distribution plan beyond that. Over the next year or so the club fizzled into temper tantrums and disagreements—just like grown-up art collectives—and was formally dissolved in 1954, leaving only Robert and Charles to carry on.

* * *

The relentless comic book–making activity brought the kids, and especially Robert and Charles, into deeper isolation and gradually pulled them into the past. The comic books they loved were all made by men whose sensibilities were rooted in pre–World War II America, a time and place Robert and Charles could glimpse but never inhabit. Barks, Stanley, and Kelly were each somewhat disaffected and always critical of contemporary life. These attitudes resonated with and then shaped Robert and Charles. They were already alienated within their extended family, soon to be alienated from most of humanity, so why not view the world as a misguided present obscuring a better past? Robert remembers noticing that an old house on a nearby Ames corner was torn down, revealing the remains of a pioneer log cabin. As if predicting his 1979 comic strip *A Short History of America*, the cabin was moved to a park and the site was promptly paved over; then a streamlined burger and milkshake joint rose up. The past, Robert was learning, whether beautiful or ugly, was forever being bulldozed under the present. It needed investigating, and maybe saving.

By the late spring of 1952 Chuck had taken a second job as a relief mail handler for the Ames base and was seeking yet another move, this time to pursue what he decided was his calling: training. Chuck managed a transfer to Camp Pendleton, next to Oceanside, California, a military town just north of San Diego. And so, having lasted some two years in Ames, the family moved again. They drove cross-country to their new life—moving farther and farther away from Philadelphia, from the O'Connells and the Jacksons, and, most painfully for Bea, from her secret daughter, Catherine. That summer Robert turned nine, and, he remembered, "a new feeling—a melancholy, [came] over [him] at this time, a new level of awareness" of past and present, the absurdity of his family, and the difficulty of what he felt might be his own imprisonment within it. With that feeling came the beginning of his compulsive collecting. He began to seriously gather and hold on to comics, playing cards, marbles, matchboxes, and milk bottle tops.

In August the Crumbs settled into a modest stucco house in Oceanside, a stretch of land dotted with new construction that terminated at the beach. Chuck trained young soldiers headed for the Korean War. Bea soon worked the night shift at a Mel's, a small fast-food restaurant, and brought home extra jukebox records like Bill Haley and the Comets' ecstatic "Crazy Man, Crazy," which gave Robert a taste of the anarchic early sounds of teenage rebellion. Bea also began taking amphetamines to stay awake on the job and would sometimes join her coworkers for early morning beach parties.

The children attended a nearby Catholic school in which corporal punishment remained the norm—one nun even employed two class bullies to rough up Charles a bit for some minor infraction. Most days after school Robert and Charles visited a nearby Salvation Army looking for old comics for a nickel each, or searching trash cans and refuse piles along the three-block walk home from school. Once, they found a stack of torn-in-half comic books that Robert carefully taped back together and kept for years like precious artifacts. Robert continued to pursue drawing, winning a twenty-five-dollar war bond in a local poster design contest in June 1953—the first time he earned money from his artwork. A few months later, Bea asked Robert if she could borrow his winnings. She cashed it for its immediate value of $18 and never mentioned it again.

Chuck found eager pupils at Camp Pendleton, one of whom would later write: “His military demeanor was consistently excellent. I noted in particular his high, two-blocked sea-going necktie that didn’t flap around. When he first introduced himself to our class, he stated his name was Crumb and ‘what a name like Crumb can do to you in boot camp.’” One of his favorite sayings at the time was “Happiness is a relative thing.” Chuck badly wanted to go over to Korea with his students, and received orders to do so, but he was needed at home. The job at Mel’s hadn’t lasted past 1953, and Bea’s mental health was fraying. She had gone from a buzzing East Coast city to progressively sleepier and more suburban towns. There was no one to commiserate with in a coffee shop—nowhere to go, really. She had been thrust into adulthood when she was just fifteen, and her life hadn’t slowed down since. Now she was stuck with five children and an unhappy, remote husband.

By the spring of 1954 she was on the verge of collapse. After a wellness check from the Red Cross, a letter dated May 26, 1954, from US Navy lieutenant commander Cornelius O. Sullivan, senior chaplain, made clear the position of the Marine Corps: “Due to his pressing family problems which involve five young children and a highly nervous wife in need of present medical attention and an operation in the near future with no possibility of their receiving adequate care from other sources, I feel that the mental worry would seriously hinder Master Sergeant CRUMB in the proper execution of his duty in an overseas base… It is my sincere conviction that the separation involved in the execution of these orders would cause the mental collapse of his wife with the resultant break-up of his family to the extent that the children would become wards of the State."

According to her children, this is about the time Bea was prescribed various medications, including Valium. There is no record of an operation, her exact prescriptions, or even a diagnosis, but after 1954 she was in one haze or another and remained medicated for the rest of her life. The mental illness that pervaded the Crumb family begins, it seems, with the union of Chuck and Bea. As the decade continued, their children began experiencing debilitating mental and physical health conditions that went largely unexamined and completely unexplained. To his dismay, after this letter Chuck did indeed remain on domestic soil, albeit in the family's new home in "Francine Villa," a large tract-housing development on the edge of Oceanside, far from any shopping or community areas. By the end of the year they'd moved yet again. The reasons were never clear, though Robert suspects it was because of noise complaints from neighbors at every location, likely from Bea and Chuck's frequent shouting matches. Chuck was determined to hold it together, though. He began to realize his children, save Carol, were never going to be "normal." They didn't want to throw a ball around, didn't much care for the other kids. In an attempt at toughening him up, Chuck threw out Robert's beloved stuffed panda (on his birthday no less) Brombo and got him a job selling newspapers at Camp Pendleton, but it didn't last long because Robert, dyslexic and timid, couldn't make change under pressure. Maxon at least showed an early interest in mechanics and baseball.

In September 1954 Robert was eleven years old, entering sixth grade and nostalgic for a past he'd never experienced. The siblings were fascinated with repeats of *The Little Rascals* and the 1930s cartoons now airing on television; they loved Disney films going back to the previous decade—*Pinocchio, Snow White, Bambi, Cinderella*—and watched those on television as well. Soon a new obsession took hold of Charles. In January the children watched the television broadcast of Disney's first live action film, *Treasure Island*, and Charles became entranced. Young Jim Hawkins, played by the troubled child actor Bobby Driscoll, was the adventurous hero in a world of moral ambiguity and darkness, as personified by Long John Silver. The film swamped Charles's imagination. Robert dutifully went to work on his own *Treasure Island* comic, but his older brother soon took charge of this project and completed it with the film's dialogue and Fuzzy the Bunny as Jim Hawkins. Charles became enamored of Bobby Driscoll, seeking more information on the young star, watching him on television and in movies whenever he could. He also began dressing up and walking around Oceanside as Long John Silver, British accent, pirate hat, homemade crutch, and all.

One day, while out with his brothers and his best friend Jack Binkinz, Charles picked a fight with a rival family of eight brothers. They convened in a nearby field: Charles stayed out of the fray, swinging his crutch and shouting lines from the film: "Oh if I only had ten toes, I'd show you how!" Everyone else charged: Maxon swung a large homemade toy rifle, just like Davy Crockett at the Alamo, and was promptly pummeled; Robert ran away; Jack was badly beaten; and Charles was unscathed. Another episode, memorialized in Robert's 1978 comic strip *Treasure Island Days*, has Charles lead his brothers in the construction of a ship out of a refrigerator box. They buried a treasure chest (actually a lunch box with some foreign coins, funny money from a cereal box, and costume jewelry) and made a map. When they went looking for the "treasure," they ran across a couple of toughs in leather jackets. Charles began yelling *Treasure Island* insults at them; they looked puzzled for a moment; punched Charles in the head, knocking him down; and kept right on walking. Even in fantasy the boys weren't safe from the cruelties of childhood.

In June of 1956, after much pleading from Bea, Chuck finally retired from his beloved Marine Corps. The uncertainty and potential danger were too much for her to bear. However complicated their family life was, the only place with viable roots for Bea was back east. Chuck got a job in corporate training in Dover, Delaware, at the International Latex Corporation, a leading supplier of aeronautic equipment to the military and a solid employer of former servicemen. After four years in California, the family drove back across the country, erasing their distance from the future in just three days. After a few weeks with the O'Connells and then the extended family of Jacksons, they settled into a newly built ranch house in the small town where Bea's extended family resided, Milford, Delaware.

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CHAPTER 2

Jugular Veins

In September 1956, Robert began eighth grade at Milford High School. The town was set near two lakes in a working-class agricultural area in southern Delaware. With typical equanimity, Robert remembers the town as “a low-grade place full of inbred white racists,” saying, “I always remember the feeling I had in that town, the conflicting pain of social alienation with the physical beauty of the place.” He wasn’t alone in his alienation.

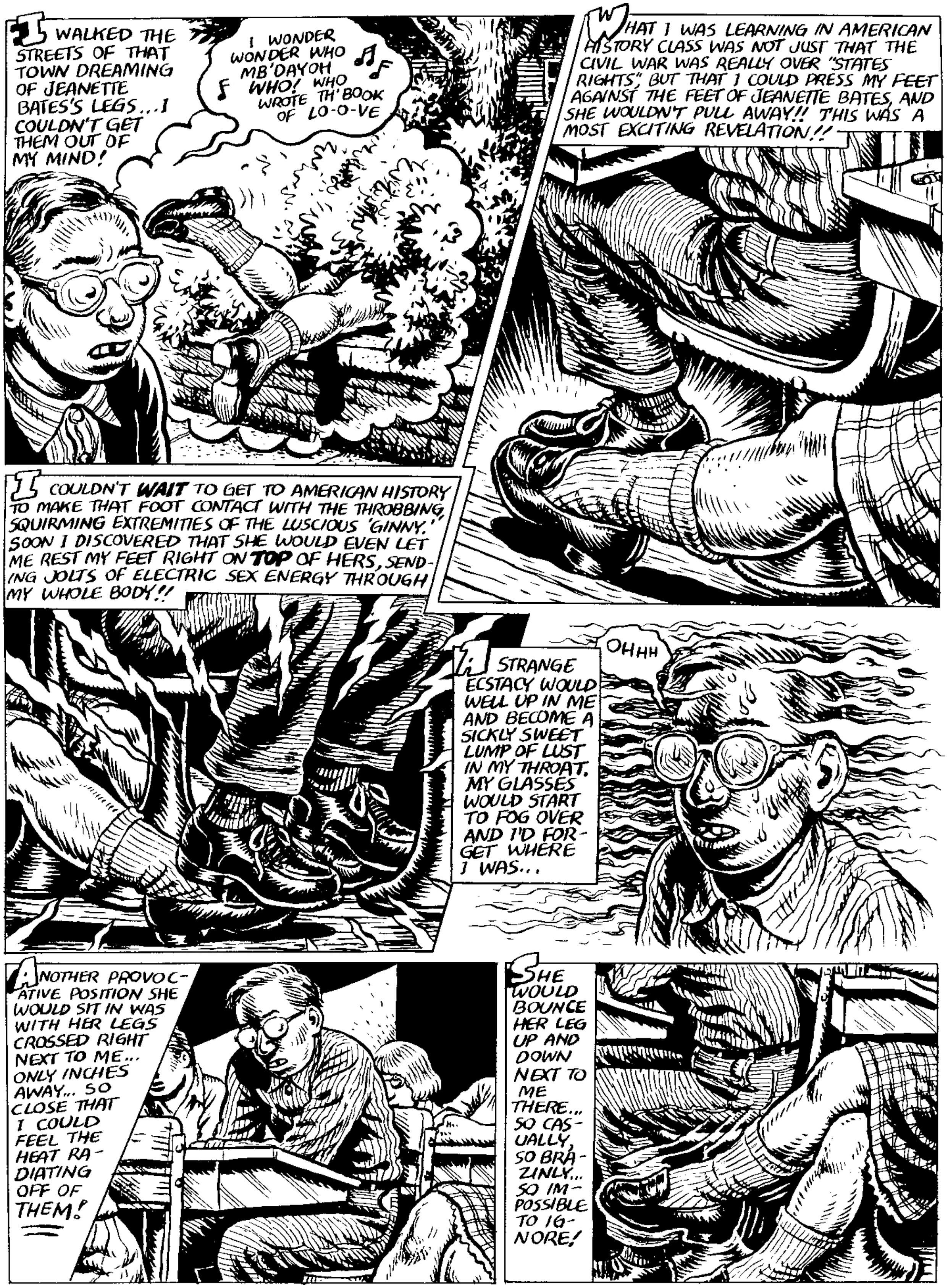
Elvis Presley was on the air, Allen Ginsberg was diagnosing the country, and the “sick” comedy of Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Jonathan Winters, and Stan Freberg was rising. Unlike the reassuring jokes of, say, Bob Hope, these comedians peeled back the American skull to reveal confusion about sex, psychology, authority, technology, and industry. Rather than offering a hearty laugh to take the blues away, they wanted to poke the country’s sore spots to provoke conversation and perhaps a bit of social change. Jules Feiffer’s comic strip *Sick, Sick, Sick*, published in the just-founded *Village Voice*, was the comic strip equivalent—his calligraphic lines delineated vignettes of contemporary relationships—embodying themes related to uncertainty, ambition, companionship, sex, and trust. As Feiffer remembered it, “America was unprepared for this sudden onslaught of doubt, insecurity, neurosis. It was unarmed against the guerrilla attack on its own psyche.... Confused and on the defensive, WASP America, having begun to lose faith in its own mythic identity, looked around and found a few funny Jews who mirrored their anxiety. They welcomed and embraced the victimized Jewish sensibility of displacement.”

But in Milford, Robert was thirteen, scrawny, with Coke-bottle-thick spectacles and two false front teeth, which were necessary after he tempted fate and took a hunk of cinder block to the mouth back in Oceanside. “In the high school I went to,” he remembered, “there were a lot of farmers and poor kids. They weren’t treated with any respect by the middle class kids at all, just looked upon as dirt, and even if you’re in your teens, if you start reading at all, or if someone turns you on to stuff, it became very clear that there’s something wrong with that. People were looked up to because they had fancy cars, they had fancy clothes, the whole phony charming act they learned to put on. If you’re an outsider and you’re perceptive you can see the picture in a broader perspective. Also, from the anger and feeling of being an outsider you develop a critical view of things. There’s something wrong with it because it rejects you.”

Robert’s sole friend that first year was Mike Britt, a fellow military brat and comics fanatic. Britt’s Milford was “like an episode of *Happy Days*: ducktails, cars, friends—but [he and Crumb] weren’t in the in-crowd.” The two pals talked comics, collaborated on strips, and skipped catechism classes to go bike riding. Britt was one of the few outsiders who spent time in the Crumb home: “I can remember being at their house and the old man coming into the bedroom and taking the boys’ shoes and polishing them himself. They wouldn’t do it. Eventually he would say, ‘Britt, time to go home.’ Bea was jittery and nervous—she once drove me home on the wrong side of street—but very nice.” Britt is a constant in Robert’s “School Log,” a handwritten and illustrated diary of each school day of the eighth grade. It is drawn in a style somewhere between Walt Kelly and Carl Barks. His comics are already well composed and paced, and he is his own best character, with Britt making frequent appearances. Robert reads as stubbornly independent, interested only in the judgments of Charles, God, and his own conscience: he refuses to say the Our Father at school because it's the Protestant version and decides instead to say it to himself; he is skeptical of a teacher's lecture on the dangers of horror comic books.

He also began experiencing the first surges of puberty. Of prime interest was Sheena, Queen of the Jungle—a dominant female adventurer modeled after Tarzan and played by Irish McCalla in a hokey television show. He would imagine himself on Sheena's back as she swung on the jungle vines, carried away from his agony. As he fixated on strong women, he focused on the lower body: large buttocks and powerful legs. He had begun staring at women's legs when he was just four years old, accompanying Bea on downtown shopping trips and, from a child's point of view, focusing on the forms in his direct sight line: women's legs in nylons with a seam tracing the curves of the calves. Every leg, especially in those 1940s high-heeled, round-toed shoes, loudly clacking on the pavement, enthralled him. They became the dominant shapes in his field of vision, shapes he wanted to grasp and explore. His female classmates also tantalized him. And it wasn't just silent flirtation in the classroom. Robert has always been obsessed with displays of physical strength and flexibility—the ultimate counterpoint to his own sense of himself as a brain in a jar, a male incapable of expressing twentieth-century ideals of masculinity, forever rejected by the girls and women he sought. Jeanette Betts sat behind Robert in his American history class. She would place her leg on his seat and Robert would gently pet it. Dolly Hensley sat to his right and he mingled his foot with hers. Decades later Robert wrote about the erotic charge of his "leg contact" with one of these girls: "Nancy Knicely sat behind me in Mr. Ely's English class—sometimes I would stretch back & sit on her knees when she pressed up against the back of my chair. She had long, shapely legs. Once I turned around & looked at her & she said, 'get off my knees' in a husky, low voice, meanwhile not moving her legs at all.” Like his teeth-shattering martyrdom in *Don’t Tempt Fate*, these moments are recounted in his 1988 comic *Footsy*. Rendered in thick, lush brushstrokes that radiate adolescent sweat, the story details the beginnings of Robert’s long-standing sexual fixations.

The kids had a game at school—throwing a knife as close to the feet of a classmate as possible. In his diary Robert breathlessly described a May 2, 1957, match he would later replay in *Footsy*: “Jeannie Betts n’ Nancy Dohring were playin’ split with a knife today at 4th period. An’ they had tight skirts on! Jeannie couldn’t throw th’ knife but Nancy could throw it good. She got Jeannie in a real wide split an’ I thought sure Jeannie’s tight skirt would rip. Just when she was about to give up she threw th’ knife about FIVE feet away from Nancy.” *Footsy* climaxes in his encounter with one Sally Burton, who towered over him, and to his delight allowed him to cower at her back: “I went over there and stood against her back as if I was using it for a shelter from the jostling hordes while I fiddled with my books and stuff.” The story closes with the adult Crumb brazenly playing footsy with a coworker in the early 1980s. Robert’s storytelling is both filled with teenage lust and absolutely fixated on accuracy. Milford High is alive in these pages—from furniture to wardrobe to the cadence of students walking the halls. Summoning the origins of his sexual identity demanded Robert maintain an absolute fidelity to place and time.


I WALKED THE STREETS OF THAT TOWN DREAMING OF JEANETTE BATES'S LEGS...I COULDN'T GET THEM OUT OF MY MIND!
I WONDER WONDER WHO MB'DAYOH WHO! WHO WROTE TH' BOOK OF LO-O-VE
WHAT I WAS LEARNING IN AMERICAN HISTORY CLASS WAS NOT JUST THAT THE CIVIL WAR WAS REALLY OVER "STATES RIGHTS" BUT THAT I COULD PRESS MY FEET AGAINST THE FEET OF JEANETTE BATES, AND SHE WOULDN'T PULL AWAY!! THIS WAS A MOST EXCITING REVELATION!!
I COULDN'T WAIT TO GET TO AMERICAN HISTORY TO MAKE THAT FOOT CONTACT WITH THE THROBBING, SQUIRMING EXTREMITIES OF THE LUSCIOUS 'GINNY.' SOON I DISCOVERED THAT SHE WOULD EVEN LET ME REST MY FEET RIGHT ON TOP OF HERS, SENDING JOLTS OF ELECTRIC SEX ENERGY THROUGH MY WHOLE BODY!!
A STRANGE ECSTACY WOULD WELL UP IN ME AND BECOME A SICKLY SWEET LUMP OF LUST IN MY THROAT. MY GLASSES WOULD START TO FOG OVER AND I'D FORGET WHERE I WAS...
OHHH
ANOTHER PROVOCATIVE POSITION SHE WOULD SIT IN WAS WITH HER LEGS CROSSED RIGHT NEXT TO ME... ONLY INCHES AWAY... SO CLOSE THAT I COULD FEEL THE HEAT RADIATING OFF OF THEM!
SHE WOULD BOUNCE HER LEG UP AND DOWN NEXT TO ME THERE... SO CASUALLY, SO BRAZINLY... SO IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE!

“Footsy,” *Weirdo* no. 20, 1987.

As much as Robert seemed to accept his geek status, Charles tried to come on like a cosmopolitan big shot from California. He was a handsome kid, hair combed up in a pompadour, thickening body outfitted in spiffy trousers and pressed shirts. His obsession with *Treasure Island* continued, and his focus on its lead actor Bobby Driscoll now morphed into an erotic fixation. He knew he was gay, had known, he would later write, since he was a little boy. The Disney Driscoll was forever young and bright, an object that would never disappoint. Charles, somewhere between a dandy and the impish prankster of years past, would break into Shakespeare at any moment. He also, less charmingly, called his classmates hicks, clods, or hillbillies, triggering an immediate pummeling. Without any way to assert himself in the social sphere, and even his own drawing beginning to fade, his confidence quickly began to sag. Carol, well mannered, pretty, and social, however, was popular. She ran for class president (Britt, Robert, and Charles dutifully drew two hundred posters for her) and though she didn’t win, she was well-liked in the community. Maxon, still the get-along younger brother, experienced what was likely his first epileptic seizure in November of 1956, but the young Robert was unaware of any larger implications beyond an overnight stay in the hospital. (Maxon’s condition has remained untreated for his entire life.) In keeping with their peripatetic past and the constant noise complaints from neighbors, in August 1957, just a year after their arrival, the Crumbs moved from their freshly built home on the south side of Milford to an older house on the north side.

Absorbed in his own life, the move didn't register as much as a major disruption for Robert. He entered ninth grade and puberty that 1957–58 school year, growing six inches and experiencing acute aches in his bones. A small consolation for the pain and hormonal rush was his discovery of *Mad.* Issue 29, from September 1956, to be precise, already a year out of date and rolled up in a classmate's back pocket. Seeing and then handling the magazine altered Robert's brain chemistry as surely as LSD would a decade later. He never did normalize. The cover by the speed-freak visionary cartoonist Wally Wood is dominated by a trompe l'oeil image of a handyman wheat-pasting an enormous faux-Victorian poster promising "Hoked up Hokums, Knocked Down Nostrums, Dragged Out Doors," and other nonsense. The image is bordered by microscopically detailed drawings depicting "home" (a lighthouse with a clothesline attached), "politics" (three monkeys in the see/hear/speak no evil poses), "literature" (a crossword puzzle), "business" (a comely lady sitting on a man's lap), and, at center, Alfred E. Neuman, the pie-faced enigma that was already a mascot for the magazine, smiling from behind a "What? Me Worry?" banner. This odd visage dated back at least a half century already—Robert had previously seen a version pinned up in an Oceanside garage alongside the "Goodbye Cruel World" cartoon of a man flushing himself down a toilet. Inside was a one-page *Pogo* parody in which the environmentalist possum advertises gasoline ("Drive More—We get richer by the mile"); a "Dining Etiquette Quiz" taken to grotesque extremes by the master of elastic details, Basil Wolverton; and a brutal send-up of summer camp that ends in environmental disaster.

It wasn't only Robert and Charles who felt like something was wrong with the world that rejected them. According to *Mad*, everything was absurd, fucked up, and on the brink of destruction, just like the Crumb household. As far-out and low-down as the edgy 1950s comedians could be, they were always part of a larger entertainment and media world, dependent on legit publishers, record companies, film studios, and nightclubs. Jules Feiffer hobnobbed with George Plimpton and was absorbed into the literary establishment. There was a cap on just how far satire could go. But for Robert, as for *Mad* in those years, legitimacy was neither of interest nor within reach. *Mad* was first a comic book and then a magazine cranked out by artists without pretensions to literature or acceptance; it could tell its audience that the world was a lie and that the only answer was all-out cultural anarchy.

Mad was effective because it was noisy, teeming, coming out of its skin, yet incredibly sophisticated, sustained by beautifully crafted cartooning straight from working-class Yiddishkeit Brooklyn. Robert wasn't entirely conscious of its subversion at the time: "It just grabbed me. I think it was more that I was freed from the need for social acceptance. I gave up trying to live up to the commonly held cultural and social forms, what you were supposed to like and dislike. I began to use my own free judgement about things. Being cast out, though painful, was a liberating process. [*Mad*'s] critique was coming out of a kind of craziness, and they didn't have a real strong analysis of what they were criticizing, they were just laughing at it all. It was this irreverent nose-thumbing at the straight-backed hypocrisy of these old American values, which were hypocritical and tried to brush all the bad stuff under the rug."

Founded in 1952, *Mad* was produced by an improbable group of brilliant young men who were, despite all social cues to the contrary, putting great effort into a comic book. They were under the admiring-if-anxious umbrella of William M. (Bill) Gaines, whose father, M. C. Gaines, a onetime salesman for Eastern Color Printing, came up with the idea of repackaging comic strips into pamphlets for newsstand distribution. In 1933, he partnered with Dell to produce the first modern comic book, *Famous Funnies: A Carnival of Comics*. After cofounding the company that ultimately became DC

Comics, Gaines began Educational Comics (EC), which released *Picture Stories from the Bible*, among other parent-friendly and, as it turned out, far less lucrative titles than those featuring superheroes he'd once owned.

M. C. Gaines's newly public-minded ambitions were cut short by his 1947 death in a boating accident. His son, William "Bill" Gaines, was twenty-five years old, pursuing a teaching degree at NYU, and divorcing his first wife when he got the news. Without an heir apparent, and with his father's company in the red, he stepped in. At first nearly allergic to comic books, Bill began to slowly like the medium, and most especially the artists and writers populating his father's world. The "Education" direction was failing, so he changed the name to reflect what he enjoyed—horror, science fiction, and suspense—thus "Entertaining Comics." In 1950, with his even younger editor, Al Feldstein, he began publishing what became his legacy and his millstone: a series of titles including *The Vault of Horror, Tales from the Crypt, The Haunt of Fear, Two-Fisted Tales*, and *Crime SuspenStories* drawn by a superb crew of artists that Gaines treated as a community of unique talents. To be an EC artist was not to just submit the work, collect your check, and leave, it was to receive artistic credit (unheard of at the time) and become a personality (through artist profiles in the comics). Unlike Barks, Kelly, and Stanley, the EC artists were making their names apart from any single character. The horror stories spared no detail: limbs were chopped, faces melted, guts extruded—drawn in sharp marks and excruciating detail by Jack Davis or in woozily fleshy brushstrokes by Graham Ingels. In crime comics by Johnny Craig readers might view a crisply outlined crime from the perpetrator's perspective, or witness a criminal hallucinate his guilt. Harvey Kurtzman's war stories are impeccably researched and politically liberal accounts of the tragedy of warfare across time. These comics were aimed not at the kid market like the heroes, but at the adolescents and college kids, even readers in their twenties. EC comics offered a glimpse underneath the stifling veneer of postwar America. They seemed to tell readers what was *really* going on in their town, with their parents—what their fathers might have actually seen, but never spoken of, in the war.

At first, the Crumb boys could hardly catch a glimpse of them: "My mother would never allow any of those EC comics in our house at all. We had to go down to the drugstore and read them there, until the guy would come over and kick us right in the bottom of the backbone and say, 'C'mon, c'mon, this isn't a library, if you're not going to buy anything, get out of here.' My brother tried to bring a couple of those EC horror comics home, and she just tore 'em up and threw 'em in the garbage." Bea's reaction was not uncommon. EC is best known, however, for *Mad*, created by Harvey Kurtzman, a Jewish kid from Brooklyn who attended the High School of Art and Design with his future collaborators Will Elder, John Severin, and Al Jaffee. After stints all over the comic book business, Kurtzman eventually arrived at EC Comics. He spent too much time writing and researching the historically accurate titles *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat* to make a solid living, so he came up with the idea of a humor comic book, thinking it would be faster to produce and ultimately more popular. It was a unique idea in the marketplace: there were humor magazines for college kids that mixed prose and gag cartoons, and there were all-gag cartoon magazines, but there wasn't a cover-to-cover satire comic book. Kurtzman wrote and drew the layouts for every story, establishing a specific format and pacing for his manic sensibility.

He found his artistic and commercial footing when he focused on specific films, actors, and, best of all, comic books. The subject of "Superduperman!," drawn in excruciating detail by Wally Wood, is the American id we'd expect: a cruel, bullying, lecherous creep. Clark Kent isn't just mild-mannered but a tubercular mess. The specificity of the satire, its depth and viciousness, set the tone for the rest of the series. “The style I developed for *Mad* over the next few years, in response to what I found in those college magazines, was necessarily thoughtful under the rowdy surface,” Kurtzman said. “Satire and parody work best when what you’re talking about is accurately targeted; or to put it another way, satire and parody work only when you reveal a fundamental flaw or untruth in your subject. Just as there was a treatment of reality in the war books, there was a treatment of reality running through *Mad*; the satirist/parodist tries not just to entertain his audience but to remind it of what the real world is like.”

The world Kurtzman revealed in *Mad* included the “truths” that Mickey Mouse was a smelly rodent, Archie a hormonally addled teenager, and on and on. The cover of the May 1954 eleventh issue, designed to mimic *Life* magazine, was graced with the headline “Beautiful Girl of the Month Reads Mad” next to Basil Wolverton’s impossibly grotesque portrait of “Lena Hyena.” Robert had in fact glimpsed this cover on an Oceanside newsstand three years before his Milford revelation but was so scared and intimidated that he didn’t dare read it, or any other issue, until that fateful day in ninth grade: “Here was this completely rude ridiculing of a venerated magazine that was part of every family’s household. There was *Mad* in the red square with this hideous, grotesque cartoon and it was not trying to be cute or smooth it over or make it nice or respectable. It was just a completely rude breakdown of everything we valued in this society.” Postwar prosperity meant that kids suddenly had spending money, both giving them agency over their own culture and making them a ready target for marketers. When *Mad* took off, it was of a different magnitude than any other title. Gaines would need it, too, because the rest of the company was about to suffer.

Within a few years of the debut of M. C. Gaines’s *Famous Funnies*, comic books were in the crosshairs of moralists looking for a scapegoat. Religious groups, teachers, parent associations, and the US government all found the enormously popular medium morally deficient, vulgar, and pernicious. This was nothing new—similar complaints trailed newspaper comic strips into the 1920s, but that form was at least folded into larger and more powerful media entities. Comic books, published by fly-by-night printers, small-time operators, and exploiters of every stripe, were far more vulnerable. The various and sundry campaigns reached a peak after World War II as simultaneous paranoias over juvenile delinquency and communism collided with the pop culture awareness of psychiatry.

Into that moment stepped Fredric Wertham. Born in 1895 to a Jewish family in Nuremberg, Germany, Friedrich Wertheimer moved to New York in 1922 to practice psychiatry. He was a liberal man, attuned to the specific plight of the Black population in America. He befriended writers Richard Wright and then Ralph Ellison and made a name for himself as both a publicity-seeking advocate for psychoanalysis and a prescient theorist of the impact of racism on urban populations. Wertham, Wright, and *Life* magazine writer Earl Brown opened the Lafargue Clinic to specifically treat the population of Harlem. As Ellison put it: “Dr. Wertham and his interracial staff seek a modest achievement: to give each bewildered patient an insight into the relation between his problems and his environment, and out of this understanding to reforge the will to endure in a hostile world.” That hostile world included a racist and sexist medium that could impact the minds of all races: comic books. From his perch at Lafargue, and as the director of the Queens General Hospital Mental Hygiene Clinic, in 1948 Wertham spoke to writer Judith Crist for the popular magazine *Collier’s*: “The comic books, in intent and effect, are demoralizing the morals of youth. They are sexually aggressive in an abnormal way. They make violence alluring and cruelty heroic. They are not educational but stultifying. If those responsible refuse to clean up the comic-book market, and to all appearances most of them do, the time has come to legislate these books off the newsstands and out of the candy stores."

The comic books of the 1940s and '50s often still shock today—dreadful marriages, unhinged scientists, desperate businessmen, and demonic beings were the norm in stories in which, say, a corpse army overruns the world and causes nuclear Armageddon or a chef becomes his own meal in a bloody buffet of cannibalism. Particularly in the years after World War II, the medium became a place to cram all the PTSD, atomic anxiety, and existential fear that could fit between two covers. These are, to contemporary eyes, rather incredible, if fraught, works of pulp artistry, but to a population concerned about "the children," they were the disease, not the symptom. Overwhelmed and scared by an onslaught of media attention in multiple magazines, in 1948 a group of comic book publishers adopted guidelines modeled on the motion picture industry's Hays Code, but it wasn't enough to ease the tensions. As more and more reports of children imitating the violence in comic books surfaced, a hysteria began to crest, with comic book burnings, letters to local officials, and a genuine sense of panic.

In November 1953, New Jersey senator Robert C. Hendrickson began his committee on juvenile delinquency, a perceived menace of indigent kids across America. Taking dramatic cues from Estes Kefauver's hugely successful committee on organized crime, Hendrickson began with several weeks of hearings in Washington and cities up and down the Eastern Seaboard on topics including gangs, narcotics, pornography, juvenile access to firearms, and child prostitution. What stuck with the public, though, was comic books. Early the next year Hendrickson announced that his committee would hold hearings devoted solely to the medium.

Two days of hearings began on April 21, 1954. Wertham, cartoonists (Walt Kelly among them), publishers, and experts on juvenile delinquency all testified to a rapt audience on national television. So, unfortunately, did William M. Gaines, who was exhausted, anxious, and coming down from Dexedrine. Sweaty, stammering, and flummoxed, he melted down as the comic book industry shuddered in horror. The committee had heard enough: the recommendation was that something had to be done about the comics, though at the state and individual level. Across the country, local legislation soon followed. In turn, newsstands decreased or eliminated comic books, cartoonists were vilified, and eventually publisher after publisher simply ceased to exist.

Just before his testimony, Wertham published his book-length study of comic books, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Written for a popular audience, it is generally understood as a censorious screed against the medium. And it partly is: Wertham makes no distinction between the myriad genres in comic books, finding sex, suicide, and murder in even the most innocent material. This is the part of the book easiest to brush off. Writing for *Commentary* in 1954, the critic Robert Warshow argued that Wertham's vision of culture was overly causal, as if the mere sight of a knife in a comic book could lead to a knife fight. In a 1959 letter to a friend, a fifteen-year-old Robert Crumb argued much the same: "I haven't read anywhere that the elimination of crime and horror comics has decreased juvenile delinquency. In fact, it's increasing. That proves how much comic books mattered. You know what they're starting to blame now? Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*!!" And while Warshow is not unconcerned about pernicious influences, he is certain that "children do need some 'sinful' world of their own to which they can retreat from the demands of the adult world."

Where Wertham is most insightful, however, is race. As with most transgressions, the comics trafficked in particularly vicious typologies. *Seduction of the Innocent* is most productively read within the context of the author's work at Lafargue. He argued that the rampant racist caricatures in comic books of the 1940s had a twofold effect: teaching white children that Black people were subhuman, and teaching Black children that they were inferior, and thus perpetuating the racism baked into the nation. He was correct. With just a few exceptions, all of the Black characters in the millions of comic books in the 1940s were either big-lipped sambos, vicious criminals, or jungle helpers from "Africa." And while the American Black population got the worst of it, Asians, Latin Americans, and, of course, the entire female population came in for ugly stereotypes that routinely ended in violence.

Attempting to save themselves, by the end of 1954 a handful of publishers adopted a new comics code enumerating forty-one rules. Among them:

- No magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title.
- All scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, masochism shall not be permitted.
- All lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations shall be eliminated.
- Profanity, obscenity, smut, vulgarity, or words or symbols which have acquired undesirable meanings are forbidden.
- Passion or romantic interest shall never be treated in such a way as to stimulate the lower and baser emotions.
- Suggestive and salacious illustration or suggestive posture is unacceptable.
- Females shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities.
- Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered.
- Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority.

It wasn't just a matter of conforming to the code—publishers and artists were exhausted. What was once a profitable free-for-all had become a risky proposition of dubious morality; from 1954 to 1956 the industry lost nearly one-third of its titles. Gaines tried to hold on, but he was spent. The cartoonists at EC, like their fans, were ambitious for the medium. The formally experimental, politically progressive, and wildly imaginative work he fostered simply couldn't be printed. EC published its last comic book cover, dated Jan–Feb

1956, but its fans never moved on. Superheroes would continue, providing a platform for some excellent cartooning, and Dell still published strong work, but there was nowhere left for the individualized, openly ambitious artistic visions of many of the company's best talents. Only *Mad* continued, though now in a magazine format, thus bypassing the comics code, and removing Gaines from an industry he felt had betrayed him. The underground would eventually reach back to EC and *Mad* for inspiration. Robert's generation came of age loving the company's freedom, quality, camaraderie, and sophistication—and hating the code and Wertham for, they believed, destroying the potential of the medium to reach beyond licensed properties and anonymous visuals.

And here is a curious schism. To scholars of psychiatry and race in America, Wertham was a daring, even heroic man who worked with some of the great minds in Black culture, pioneered low-cost psychiatric treatment, and anticipated critical race theory. Moreover, Wertham understood the power of the medium to imprint images on a generation and he wanted to treat "comics" as he might a patient. But to decades of comic book fans and the entire underground comic book generation, he was the bogeyman: a blunt force of suppression. Robert and his peers did not want to be treated. The treatment, for them, was part of the problem. They were not out to please the general public. Release, artistic freedom, not repression, was paramount, regardless of the collateral damage. They felt the need to engage, albeit with some irony, precisely the racist stereotypes Wertham found so dehumanizing.

In the aftermath of the comic book scare, *Mad* flourished as a magazine, so much so that in late 1955 Harvey Kurtzman asked for a 51 percent ownership stake, which Bill Gaines denied. Kurtzman quit, confident that he'd make it on his own. This was the first of a series of choices, all of which Robert watched carefully, that meant his hero was constantly hustling for work, never in control of his artistic or publishing life. In 1957, Kurtzman formed a co-op to produce an ambitious humor comic book called *Humbug*, the second issue of which Robert vividly remembers seeing that year at the local soda fountain in Milford. Underneath the blaring red headline "Exposed: The Truth About Radiation" was a black and white drawing by Will Elder of a household radiator in a slovenly tenement apartment. Like *Mad* cover designs before it, the image was framed with tiny antic images, this time by Jack Davis. "That cover hit me like a thunderbolt. I thought, 'That's the deepest thing I've ever seen.' It's so completely outside of anything else in the media at the time and yet, was completely hip about what was going on in America.'"

Robert's *Humbug* revelation wasn't just limited to the surreal hilarity of the cover, which deflated the atomic anxiety felt keenly by Robert and his generation as they crouched beneath desks during school drills. It was through *Humbug* that he realized he wasn't alone. The letters pages of *Humbug* no. 9, May 1958, included a note from Doug Brown in Ann Arbor, Michigan, asking that the editors plug his *Humbug* fanzine, *Spoof!*, and print his address for fellow fans. Mike Britt spotted it first and hurriedly told Robert, who sent fifteen cents to Brown and got back the mimeographed zine containing ads for old EC and *Mad* comic books alongside essays by fans who would soon become historians of the medium. "I found out by reading *Spoof!* that me, Charles and Britt weren't the only clods in the world interested in cartoons and comics and such. But there is a sort of a 'fandom' as they call it… Well, after seeing *Spoof!* we got to thinking… why not make a magazine?"

Robert detailed the story of his own magazine in his November 1958 "Almanac," which, along with its succeeding title, "Arcade," was a one-of-a-kind manuscript loosely modeled on the mix of prose, drawings, and comics in Walt Kelly's popular *Pogo* books. They were drawn in composition notebooks running to sixty pages, some of which were mailed to friends, and others kept at home. Robert's youthful memoir begins: “In this book is a biography written by me […] it be a biography of a magazine that had good intentions but not good sales. After it all ended, I decided to make a record of the whole story, with most of the events as they happened.” What he left out of this account are the details of his mother’s mental breakdown. Sometime in 1958 while the kids were at school, Chuck institutionalized Bea for three days. He watched as men strapped her down to a stretcher and took her away for shock treatment. When she returned the house was quiet again for six months, but by the end of the year things were as discordant as ever. Bea began taking amphetamines again and the screaming fights resumed. In 1964, Chuck committed Bea a second time, with the same ineffective outcome.

What had to have been an unsettled, anxious time in the family’s life went unrecorded in any “Almanac.” It was buried deep beneath the emerging Crumb/Britt fandom enterprise, which would be called *Foo*. Robert and Charles took summer jobs at the International Latex Corporation drawing visual aids for the training department at a dollar an hour, eight hours a day, to pay for the eventual print job. Britt, Charles, and Robert cooked up narratives that they drew in pencil on tracing paper. There were genre stories formatted just like Kurtzman’s parodies, like “Bug Rogers,” “Revenge,” as well as Robert’s first time in print as his own protagonist, imagining himself as an intrepid reporter in “Report from the Brussels World’s Fair.” After a few false starts, including a trip to their uncle Frank Jackson’s print shop (he didn’t offer a family discount), the trio paid $10.22 for three hundred copies of their six-by-nine-inch fanzine printed on an early Xerox machine at the International Latex Corporation. And while the poor quality of the printing was a big disappointment, Britt, Charles, Max, Sandra, and Robert went ahead and folded and stapled *Foo* number 1. They sent out a few to their new pen pals—some of whom reviewed it in their own fanzines—sold a few at school, and even went door-to-door in Milford. Issues 2 and 3 followed that fall, with “Tom & Jerky,” “Xorro,” “My Encounter with Dracula!,” one-page gags, and even a letters column. Each issue sold less than a hundred copies and the boys deemed the effort not worth the return. They abandoned a half-completed fourth issue, and Animal Town Publications’ brief foray into commercial publishing limped to an end.

Despite *Foo*’s poor sales, word quickly spread about two talented brothers in Delaware who were funny, were critical, and could really draw. They began receiving more fanzines in the mail—*Frantic, Echh*, *Fanfare*, and others were filled with comics, reviews, essays, drawings, interviews, and lists. Nineteen fifties comic book fandom, like 1930s science fiction fandom, incubated some of the medium’s first critics and historians by rewarding strong and singular points of view and obsessive checklist compiling. It also gave young talent a place to develop and get feedback before trying to hit the big time. Fanzines were where some of the earliest comic book history writing appeared and where future underground artists such as Robert, Jay Lynch, and Skip Williamson first encountered each other. Fandom offered Robert a glimmer of a community, even if school was alienating. Most crucially for his future, *Foo* attracted the attention of a publisher and college student in Kent, Ohio, named Marty Pahls.

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CHAPTER 3

A New Family

The end of the 1950s was still ostensibly a time of American optimism—a booming economy, space travel on the horizon, and the youthful John F. Kennedy ascending to the presidency. But in early 1959 the Crumb family, which was appearing less and less normal on the outside, was descending into grave disorder. Chuck, unsmiling, serious, but still barrel-chested and rod-straight, came home for dinner, said little, and kept to himself. Bea, looking a decade older than her thirty-nine years, was dazed but present, usually chain-smoking in front of the television, occasionally joined by Viola and Catherine, who now had three children of her own. Charles, seventeen, was trudging through his senior year at Milford, mercilessly teasing Maxon and Sandra, and occasionally slashing car tires. When he was caught in the act by an upper-crust Milfordian—precisely the sort of man Chuck aspired to be—his father punched Charles, hard, knocking him to the floor, confirming his son's status as an abject loser. Chuck's shame was immense, eclipsed only by the self-loathing of his eldest son. He placed his hopes in Carol, eighteen, atypically blond, with a broad smile and a friendly demeanor. She was the only sibling who maintained respect for Chuck and blamed Bea for their domestic turmoil. After graduating from Milford High School, she worked for her father for a few months before moving to Philadelphia with her beau. Maxon, fourteen, a budding mechanic, was wiry and avuncular; Sandra, twelve, had mischief in her eyes and a knowing smile. And Robert, at fifteen, resembled the geeks Jerry Lewis played in the movies: rail thin, beak nosed, Adam's apple ready to bob in distress. He and Maxon shared a bed until Robert was seventeen.

Robert read, drew, wrote copious letters, walked downtown to visit the stores, and waited for the mailman to arrive each day in hopes of a fanzine or some new piece of information from Mike Britt, who had moved to Northampton, Massachusetts, the year before, and his new correspondent Marty Pahls, then a journalism major at Kent State University living at home in a small tract house on the edge of Kent. Marty was a frequent, trenchant presence in the letter columns of comic book fanzines and the publisher of one of his own, called *Fanfare*. Robert was an increasingly silent observer of the rites and rituals of teen life, regarding himself as a brilliant and misunderstood soul. Catholicism still had a hold on him—he was confounded that more people weren't concerned about going to hell—but mostly as an institution of fear. He began educating himself through his college-student pal about art, literature, politics, and music. Marty practically tutored Robert, writing ten-page single-spaced letters suggesting the father of American satire Mark Twain and the panoramic fiction of John Dos Passos, and urging on his research into J. D. Salinger, likely intuiting a resemblance between the mad brilliance of the Glass family and his Milford correspondents.

Writing to Britt, following a discussion of Carl Barks and EC fandom of an intensity usually reserved for a *Partisan Review* essay on T.S. Eliot, Robert summarized his shifting sense of self: "I realize now that I just can't make myself interested in teenage stuff… Cars 'n' sex talk 'n' switchblades 'n' sports. I finally realize that it's useless for me to try to get popular in school, and ride around in a car nights… because I… I just don't get a kick out of it… I'd rather sit and read a good book…. Now, I don't feel miserable or anything because I can't be in with the crowd… I just don't care at all… I'm content with my own interests and correspondents like you, Pahls, and the others."

Having an audience offered some more motivation for Robert. His letters had their own series titles: *Note*, or when addressed to Britt, *Farb*, which was often in comic book form, complete with bright cover illustrations in colored pencil: a lovingly rendered portrait of Britt; a bucolic image of Robert eating a watermelon by a stream, the sun reflecting off the clear blue water. A spring 1959 eleven-page *Farb* covering the latest news about Milford, comic books, and summer plans is modeled on an EC story. Robert imagines himself arriving home on a rainy day, opening a hatch in his bedroom, and descending to an underground cave leading to a waterway. He hops in a boat, rows to an old shack, transforms into a werewolf, kills Britt, then transforms back to his old self, only to drown in quicksand. It's an astonishing performance—the comic was drawn in one session, without planning, and flows effortlessly, the storytelling unhurried, slowly building first to Robert's transformation, then his journey to an unaware Britt, whom we first glimpse on page seven, to the sudden attack, and then the EC-style justice visited upon the murderer himself. Charles, meanwhile, relished taunting Britt with gorgeous drawings of his prized Carl Barks comic book collection. Most collectors would simply write a list of their latest acquisitions, but Charles completed drawings often annotated with teasing descriptions: "Cover—Blue letters, flesh-colored background. Wallpaper is all sorts of bright colors. Brand-new condition. Mike Britt eats shit."

Robert was also still hawking *Foo* by mail and sometimes door-to-door, telling startled adults that it was a school project, and voraciously collecting and learning all things Kurtzman, Kelly, and Barks. He gradually gravitated to comics that were declarative in their sophistication: *Humbug* cartoonist Arnold Roth, whose hip, jazz-inflected observational strip *Poor Arnold's Almanac* ran in the hometown paper, the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* and, most important, Jules Feiffer, whose strip was collected in the 1958 mass-market book *Sick, Sick, Sick: A Guide to Non-Confident Living*, bringing what was once a cult phenomenon in the *Village Voice* to homes across the country. “Sick” humor was gradually transitioning to the more bourgeois musings of Mike Nichols and Elaine May, but Feiffer would have been a step up from *Mad*—both visually accessible enough to emulate, as Robert would in his letters, and offering more of a taste of the adult world: phonies, failed ladies’ men, hypocrites, winsome dancers, frustrated office workers brought down to size with a laugh.

Inspired by both the abundance of old publications in Delaware secondhand stores and the occasional hint in fanzines, Robert began reaching back ever farther into the past. He perused everything from the 1920s digest *Cartoons Magazine*, which offered reprints by and information on the cartoonists of that era, to Charles Dickens’s illustrated magazine *All the Year Round*. He also pored over *The American Past: A History of the United States from Concord to Hiroshima, 1775–1945*, an enormous book comprised of photographs, drawings, paintings, and prints arranged to tell the story of Robert’s home country. The scope and detail offered the teenager an understanding of the arc of history, which he supplemented with the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular illustrated magazines *Life, Puck*, and *Judge*, found in some of the same haunts in which he was buying comic books (and his local library, from which he liberated some favorite images).

If Barks, Kurtzman, and Feiffer offered him points of view and narrative structures, earlier artists, including Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler, were relaying the thematic and technical possibilities of graphic art. Keppler, a cofounder of *Puck*, was a master of intricate, humorous pictures that exploited the bold colors and tones of lithography. In the late 1800s he employed fantasy as easily as he did realism: For a “physiognomical study” of Pope Leo XIII, Keppler delicately, but with élan, constructs the Pope’s bust out of agonized figures, a crown, and geese peeking out from under his zucchetto, itself labeled “propaganda.”

Nast was best known as the *Harper’s Weekly* cartoonist who, at the magazine’s subscription peak of one hundred thousand in the 1860s and 1870s, shaped the visual imagination of the country. He could warm his audience by creating the enduring image of the bearded and jolly Santa Claus, and enrage them through his graphic commentaries on the corruption of William “Boss” Tweed and the New York Democratic Party organization, Tammany Hall. Nast was also a master of hatching and crosshatching—drawing parallel and intersecting lines of various densities—which, before the advent of widespread photographic reproduction in the 1870s enabled printers to reproduce continuous tones, was the only way to render the light-to-dark spectrum that signals volume and space. Nast’s technique, which remains an influence and ideal for Robert, gave life to complex single-image narratives such as *The Tammany Tiger Loose*, in which the big cat, signifying the power of the party machine, roars over the prostrate female embodiment of the republic in a Roman arena presided over by the “emperor,” Boss Tweed.

For his depth, skill, and popularity, Nast was a hero to cartoonists well into the mid-twentieth century. Harvey Kurtzman paid tribute by using a Boss Tweed image on the cover of *Mad* number 25 with the headline “*MAD* Fearlessly Exposes the Tweed Ring.” This cover was, fittingly, Robert’s first exposure to Nast: a clever triple-pronged gag poking fun at the vainglory of news magazines and the absurdity of *Mad* itself, while gently suggesting that Kurtzman and his collaborators (especially the crosshatch maestro Jack Davis) had an illustrious ancestor in the grand old man of American cartooning. Nast to Kurtzman, Kurtzman to Crumb, Crumb to future generations—it's a lineage stoked and continued by artists seeking kinship in a marginal medium. Aside from a drawing technique he would continue to hone throughout his life, what impressed Robert most was Nast's ability to give convincing life to the nineteenth century through drawing alone. This wasn't just the imagined space of Pogo's Okefenokee Swamp; it was the time of his great-grandparents, and Nast made it come alive on the page. Nast's work offered a way for the past-obsessed Robert to bring viewers into cartoon spaces that felt both realistic and elastic, finished but open to interpretation. Having drawn breezy scenes without tone or depth, now Robert began crosshatching shadows wherever he could, creating ever more complicated scenarios in *Foo* and his own comics in *Arcade*.

Into this already rich cultural life he added a new obsession: music. A few early rock and roll records aside, Robert hated most of the pop music in the 1950s. Bea enjoyed the smooth stylings of Dinah Shore, Perry Como, and Tony Bennett, but just as he was put off by superheroes, he was also turned off by these slick, professional entertainers and their all too lush sounds. It all reeked of phoniness, a catch-all term applied to anything with an aural or visual veneer that seemed too contrived or slick. Robert now wanted to play his own music, and after failed attempts to craft a cigar box ukulele, at age thirteen he received a plastic Arthur Godfrey ukulele as a Christmas present. He taught himself to strum, albeit backward because he was left-handed. As he became more serious about practicing and listening, he began searching for older, ostensibly more "authentic" sounds.

He found what he was looking for on a 78 rpm at Willkie's secondhand furniture store, one of his usual Milford haunts. He was seduced by the evocative title and exquisitely designed label, and for ten cents he took home "Down in the Cemetery" by the singer-guitarist Billy Bird. Recorded in Atlanta and released on Columbia in

1928, it’s a plaintive but danceable vocal/guitar song, similar to other country blues, about going to the cemetery to visit his “baby’s grave” and then leaving town to try to forget her. For the teenage Robert it was transfixing—an entirely new sound from a culture utterly unknown to him. And while the music had been everyday entertainment to its intended Southern contemporaneous Black audience, in 1958, Robert, like so many others of his generation, had simply never heard anything like it. *Down in the Cemetery* made him feel there might be an aural equivalent to the old visual culture he so loved.

Millions of 78s were released in the 1920s and ’30s, amounting to an enormous, haphazard, and profound cultural accounting of America’s musical talent before radio and later television created a national audience that would gradually homogenize its art, making impossible the kind of localized, individualized sounds that Robert prized. In those years talent scouts would look for pockets of regional sounds, music made by and for individual communities that could be recorded and sold back to them and the surrounding populace. The state of Virginia, say, might have multiple string bands and songsters of strictly local renown, entirely unknown in North Carolina or even in the next county. In selling this music, the record companies focused along ethnic and racial lines—there would be music marketed to Black people and music marketed to white people. Along with the sounds came the alluring promotional graphics, sleeve designs and label catalogs that sought to codify racial ideals: bold, playful lettering and images of plentitude, ecstasy, heartbreak, and death. What was rent asunder by capital would eventually be brought together by collectors and scholars (pioneered by Harry Smith’s 1952 reissue project *American Anthology of Folk Music*, which exposed Robert to a variety of music when he heard it in the early 1960s) who understood that all of the music, however it was marketed and sold, belonged to the larger story of the nation's musical heritage.

In 1959, Robert began searching for 78s that might sound akin to the music he heard in the early talkies shown on the late show, or the musical soundtracks to the early *Little Rascals* and *Laurel & Hardy* comedies. He'd tried LP compilations of swing music and listened to the recreations of more recent vintage but never quite found what he was searching for until he purchased five or six old 78s for twenty-five cents a pop at the farmer's market in Dover. They were just what he was hoping for: late-1920s dance orchestra discs by the likes of Charlie Fry and His Million Dollar Pier Orchestra, Ben Bernie & His Hotel Roosevelt Orchestra, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers. "I realized I'd been syncopation deprived," he remembers. He has written movingly about these tunes as "the good-time social music of a vanished urban civilization, a lost world of smokestack factories, clanging trolley cars—and everybody wore hats! In all the large cities and towns of America there were hundreds of night spots providing live music for listening or for dancing." This is what Joe Hall and Frank A. Jackson played, what Viola danced to, and the audio inspiration for so many of the great animated cartoons of the late 1920s and early '30s.

That year, record collecting became as important as comic books. He would play each record three or four times just to get a feel for the music, the wide grooves (nearly five times as thick as the 33 rpm vinyl "microgroove" records popular again today) offered an expansive sound that cut right to his core. Robert was now a record hound, and so was Marty Pahls—they added lists of records to their correspondence, possible trades, and included reel-to-reel tape recordings of recent finds in their mailings. Robert's immersion in his chosen cultures was a continual source of pleasure during an otherwise tough adolescence.

In June 1959 Charles graduated from Milford High School with few prospects. Looking for a chance to start over, he traveled to California to stay with his old Oceanside friend and crush, Jack Binkinz. But three years had passed, and while Charles had grown more insular, and more aware of his forbidden homosexuality, Jack had grown up to be a macho, heterosexual California kid. He quickly guessed the truth about Charles, calling him "queer" several times during a difficult six-week stay. He returned home dejected and never again spoke to Binkinz.

While Charles was away, Robert, out from under his older brother's steely control for the first time, took a bus trip of his own to Manhattan to meet Stan Lynde, a young cartoonist just a year into creating a funny, vivid western comic strip called *Rick O'Shay*. Robert had sent him artwork, received some encouraging responses and an invitation to visit. Lynde and his wife, Jane, retrieved Robert at Penn Station in their Volvo and drove the awed teenager through Times Square, down through the midtown tunnel, and out to Massapequa Park, Long Island, a flat suburban town the likes of which young professionals dreamed of. Lynde had also once been a young fan, so he allowed him to stay for three days, ending with another adventure around the city looking for old comic books and magazines. The speed, crowds, and aggressiveness of New York left him intimidated and fascinated.

Robert breathlessly reported his experience in a July letter to Marty Pahls: "Putting out a comic strip is much more complicated than I thought! First, he has to type out a script, which he takes in to the syndicate editor in New York every five weeks to be checked and changes made wherever necessary. The script's layout has to be very exact… Each day's script is put on a separate sheet… and all work has to be in six weeks ahead of publication. Second, he talks over the week's layout with his assistant, who lays out the strips and does lettering. He tells his assistant about the size he wants each panel and about where he wants the lettering placed. The assistant pencils and inks the panel borders and pencils and inks in the lettering. Then Stan pencils in the characters and background of the week's strips. Stan takes a lot of time with his penciling, and does a very detailed job. Here again, he said a lot of cartoonists just do a sloppy job, but he likes to do a good job with penciling because then he can make any changes before inking, saving the trouble of whiting out mistakes. Finally comes the inking, which, like I said, he spends the most time on… It takes him about an hour and a half to ink in one strip. He leaves the areas he wants blackened in for his assistant… He puts a small 'X' in the space he wants blackened in. After the inking is done, the strips go back to the assistant for corrections on the lettering… and filling in the black spaces…. Then Stan mails the strips in to the syndicate for the week… Then the whole routine starts over the next day… Whew! Stan says he usually works about ten hours a day… He says he sometimes envies the people who just go to work from 9 to 5 every day for 5 days a week. While I was there I penciled several Sunday pages for him… just put in the borders for him though."

Lynde's process was much the same as it had been for decades of professional cartoonists. The discipline, routine, sheer professionalism, was overwhelming for Robert. He was worried about his future—would he be able to be a comic strip artist? A magazine cartoonist? How could he make anything personal? Comic books were not even part of his internal conversation—EC was dead, *Mad* was a magazine, the action-hero stories of DC Comics were an alien world to him, and it would be another two years before Marvel revived the superhero industry with *Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four*, and all the rest. But he kept drawing. Mike Britt sent him a crow quill pen, just like Lynde used, and Robert tentatively began drawing with it. Crow quills have a flexible steel nib, so that the artist can dip it in ink and then make a line thick and thin in a single stroke, giving objects and characters a jaunty presence on the page, but it takes dedicated practice to master using it. It remains Robert's favorite drawing tool—a preference that connects him back to the earlier days of newspaper cartooning and magazine illustration, when engraving was replaced by offset printing, enabling pen and brush lines to be reproduced with great fidelity.

Aside from Robert and Charles's brief forays out of state, that summer of 1959 the kids were mostly on their own in Milford. Air-raid sirens were a regular sound and anti-communist hysteria ran high—Fidel Castro had seized control of Cuba, Nikita Khrushchev was scheduled to meet with President Eisenhower to discuss the nuclear standoff in Berlin between their countries. Robert heard rumors of an imminent invasion and enslavement of the local populace by a cabal of the Chinese and the Russians. But life went on. Marty visited for a few days, met the whole family, went junking with the boys, and grew ever more fascinated by the isolated, uniquely talented brothers. He encouraged them to take their talents seriously and pursue professional careers.

Annoyed by their indolence, Chuck ordered Robert and Charles to go out and make some money. "Youth is a time for action, not sitting around in your pajamas philosophizing," he said. Charles joined the local theater guild and Robert would walk up and down the suburban streets, pick a house, sit on the curb across the street and make a drawing of it, then knock on the door and ask if the resident would like to buy the drawing for twenty-five cents. He collected quite a few quarters that way, broke through some of his shyness, and developed his draftsmanship.

Carol had graduated from high school the year before and, with a steady job, moved to her own apartment; everyone else in the Crumb family was pushing against any sense of "normalcy." The television was on all day and into the night, while a chain-smoking Bea sat in the kitchen, talking to no one in particular. Chuck kept his distance, and Viola, if she came by at all, would also sit, puffing cigarettes, drinking whiskey, and complaining that Black people were ruining America. There wasn't much to do but get weird. Robert had developed hormone-charged wrestling games with his twelve-year-old sister, Sandra. At some point in all this contact Robert, fifteen, taken by surprise, had his first orgasm. And then another and another. Sandra may or may not have realized what was happening. No one was talking to the kids about sex, there was no sense that this was anything other than a biological reaction. These were Robert's only experience of female contact aside from playing footsy with girls in his high school classes, and the physicality of it was more than his pent-up hormones could bear. The wrestling lasted about six months, at which point Sandra, perhaps intuiting that something wasn't quite right, finally put a stop to rolling around with her brother.

In September 1959 the family moved yet again, this time to a small, one-story brick house on the edge of Dover, Delaware, twenty miles north of Milford, home to the International Latex Corporation as well as the Dover Air Force Base. It was a shorter commute for Chuck, and, with two colleges and a big central library, a more sophisticated town of wide, tree-lined streets and neoclassical buildings. With a shorter drive in one direction, Chuck took a second job working in a chicken processing plant outside of town, partly to make ends meet and partly to stay out of the house. Entering Dover High as a new eleventh grader, Robert was deeply depressed. He fell into his usual pattern of isolation, though his art teacher took an interest and he drew covers for the school newspaper, the *Ecolian*. For one issue he drew a Nast-like image of Kennedy and Nixon slinging mud at each other. His sole friend was a fellow comic book obsessive named Ernest "Hap" Lenhart, with whom he would take long walks, holding forth, as Charles did, on the ills of the modern world. Lenhart's family, like many in town, gave the Crumbs a wide berth. They were known as a troubled family.

Charles and Robert were now focusing on two-man comics in the pages of their hand-drawn notebook comic, *Arcade*, which sported color covers by Robert that ranged from Nast-inspired political cartoons (white people cling to the stern of a boat labeled “Bigotry and Race Prejudice” as it sinks into waters labeled “Education”); ecstatic illustration (Fritz the Cat leaps to embrace the sun in a bright yellow sky in a picture titled “SPRING”) to fantasy (a graphite-toned Robert stands just behind a Technicolor young blond woman in a dark sweater, knee socks, and a pleated skirt as she asks, “You say you want to help me find myself, Robert?”). Within, each brother drew and lettered his own character, to which the other would have to respond while moving the story forward. They drew the twenty-one-page *Treasure Island Days* in this fashion, among other features done entirely for an audience of themselves, Maxon, Sandra, Britt, and Pahls.

Robert’s artwork is differentiated by his carefully composed panels of consistent characters and the thick, gentle lines he made with a relatively dull pencil. Charles kept his pencils sharp and pressed hard on the page, his figures often changing from one panel to the next. Robert was a disciplined cartoonist, Charles was in thrall to his thoughts and the lines they produced. He was becoming lost in a curious drawing tic: whole figures became consumed by wavy lines delineating skin like weighted drapery, destroying any clarity or fixed character design, and with it, any narrative flow. In the pages of *Arcade*, Robert first introduced Fred the Cat, based on the family’s grumpy tomcat; Charles’s characters began calling him “Fritz,” and the name stuck. Soon Fritz was taking center stage in adaptations of *Robin Hood* and *A Christmas Story*.

When he wasn’t drawing, listening to records, or in school, he and Charles, who had nothing but time and ideas on his hands, discussed the nature of humanity, society, literature, and religion. They thought of entering a Trappist monastery to get away from a harsh and unforgiving world on the brink of nuclear disaster. They went through a phase of praying constantly, said their rosaries, and discussed theology with their local priests and ministers. The brothers were unable to resolve the contradictions of Catholicism, particularly the issue of free will. Having closely read Mark Twain's book *What Is Man?*, in which an "Old Man" and a "Young Man" debate the nature of free will, Robert took in Twain's belief in predestination, the idea that humans are solely the product of their environment. If there is no free will, then what we really need to do is try to understand the world so we can figure out how best to live in it. Morality is not a matter of offending or pleasing God but is more about the Golden Rule, do unto others. Now a much larger question confronted the two teenagers raised in an unintellectual, unquestioning lower-class segment of American society: might religion, and indeed, much of societal norms, be a sham? Seemed like it. Robert went to confession for the final time in November. Charles was so disappointed that he broke the heads off statues and defaced some of the saints in the church. He began to see the Catholic Church and Walt Disney as similar constructs: enthralling children and then exploiting them. Charles felt profoundly betrayed—as an innocent child he had been personally deceived by powerful organizations.

In January 1960, after Charles and Robert told their parents they no longer wanted to attend church, Chuck invited a local priest, Father Donahue, to the house to discuss the boys' decision. When Robert politely asked, "But, Father, don't you think that a lot of people just go to church out of social obligation?" Chuck was in the unexpected position of peacemaker as the priest moved to hit his son. He broke it up, Father Donahue split, and Robert never again attended church.

In March 1961 the Crumbs moved once again—this time to the center of Dover. As he slouched toward high school graduation, Robert's talent was still gaining notice: a local arts club had sponsored his entry to a national "art talent" contest with a $600 art-class scholarship prize attached. Other kids took note, so he was invited to help with the prom decorations at Dover High. One weekend he went to work at "popular girl" Georgeann Weller's sprawling ranch house and joined the prom committee in the garage. While the group worked on the decorations for "An Evening in Venice," Robert lost himself in the work. When he finally looked up a couple of hours later he was alone in the garage. He followed the sounds of bubblegum music to the den and found various couples making out. Feeling left out and used, he simply left the house without saying a word. Robert finished high school as he started it—unattached to any friend group, alone in any given crowd, and keenly aware of his own isolation. He perceived his life as one of a misunderstood, misshapen, and unappealing outsider, and his fellow teenagers as conformist, uncomprehending dolts. A photo in his senior yearbook of Robert peering into his locker reads: "Hey, where are my Gym Shorts?" The caption confirmed how little he was known—he never even attended gym class. It was a lasting bit of humiliation for the eternal geek. He graduated Dover High as a solid C student. Bea gave him a radio and a watch as gifts, but Charles Sr. returned both, outraged at the exorbitant cost and what he viewed as his wife's coddling and financial irresponsibility.

* * *

Robert passed from high school right back to his room. Beginning that summer of 1961 he settled into a solid year of indecision. His depression, manageable with a school schedule, now took up full-time residence. He was horrified by what he perceived to be the insanity and stupidity of adult society, and mortified by the knowledge that while he had talent, he had no idea how to actually do anything with it, where it might fit.

He used his scholarship to take art classes with professors who taught him to draw from a model but confused him with discussions of contemporary abstraction. Robert had no aspirations to attend art school, and anyhow, no such financial resources were available. Robert made the rounds to some local shops looking for work but never followed up; a commission to paint a mural came and went; Marty offered him a place to stay in Kent, Ohio, but Robert waffled. He couldn't make any decisions, not even about a general direction. Chuck insisted he at least cut the grass in the front yard, among other chores.

Though he was deeply depressed that year, he had the luxury of near-total freedom from any obligations or responsibilities. It was a time to both endure and exploit. Robert drew prolifically, listened to records, and wrote lengthy journal entries and letters chronicling his condition. He was growing more serious and reflective. The life-or-death searching of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey* offered lives beyond high school. In the night, the brutal sun having subsided, he and Charles walked the empty streets of Dover, deep in what Charles called "truth sessions," during which they confessed their innermost fears to each other and discussed how to be authentic, the necessity of love and beauty, and the purpose of life on earth. During home sessions Charles would sometimes get drunk and recite Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" or choice selections from Shakespeare. During the day, Charles, age nineteen, was attempting to act on his sexual urges by inviting grade-school boys over to the house. He played as though scolding them for imagined crimes and also let them climb on and pummel him. Reportedly nothing sexual transpired, but it was frequent and blatant enough that local parents complained to Chuck, who put an end to the gatherings.

Outside of the Crumb bubble, the Berlin Wall went up, President Kennedy advised Americans to build fallout shelters, and, in the aftermath of the Freedom Riders of the spring, the civil rights movement coalesced into a nationwide concern. Little of that made an impression on Robert. He was busy in his mind, developing elaborate idiosyncratic masturbation fantasies, and with his collections, the latter he recognized as a distraction: “I suppose my old records wouldn’t be such a ‘fixation’ with me, as you call it, if I had a more adequate social and sexual life. I guess that’s why they don’t mean as much to you as they do to me, because you are able to satisfy these basic needs and the need for compensation is not as great. I have come to realize that one of the main reasons why I’ve always been collecting things like mad is because I feel lost and I need something to cling to, something to live for and devote myself to, to take the place of a social life to some extent. I think I would give up all my material possessions without hesitation for the love of a woman.” In the meantime, inspired by reading tales of collectors finding great discs in Black neighborhoods, he did the same, knocking on doors and asking if the residents might have some old records they’d be willing to sell. He scored some good blues and gospel sides and was enough of a fixture that when he’d amble down to the Black section of Dover he was greeted as “the ol’ record man.” He carefully cataloged his acquisitions and listened to them over and over, deepening his appreciation for old-time blues and jazz and soon, old-time white country music.

Despite his doubts, the more comics Robert drew in *Arcade*, the more artistically ambitious he became. In 1961, he told Marty Pahls, “[I’m] trying to put into my work the everyday human realities that I’ve never found in a comic strip yet, though [Jules] Feiffer has come the closest. It’s an extremely difficult thing to do in the comic strip medium… There are so many delicate little things that, when I try to express them in comic strip form, come out awkward… Charles and I have had a few debates as to whether you can express reality to its fullest in the comic strip… he says it can't be done. I say I'm going to try it." Aside from Feiffer, what Robert was attempting had existed, albeit within family-friendly constraints, in a handful of prewar strips, but otherwise it simply wasn't available, although there was a glimmer of hope in *Help!,* a magazine founded in 1960 by *Mad* creator Harvey Kurtzman.

Help! mixed comics by Arnold Roth and Will Elder, prose, and fumetti (photographs printed as a sequential narrative) with comedians including Dick Van Dyke, Jonathan Winters, and Woody Allen. *Help!* arrived just as Kurtzman's *Mad* and *Humbug* fans were graduating college and keen to contribute to their hero's efforts. Aware and encouraging of young aspiring cartoon satirists, Kurtzman started a feature called "Public Gallery," which published gag panels by amateurs, including future underground cartoonists Jay Lynch, Skip Williamson, and Joel Beck, as well as an entire story by the lanky, dry-witted Texan Gilbert Shelton, who'd gotten some notoriety for his work in the University of Texas at Austin's humor magazine the *Texas Ranger*, and for his Superman-parody strip *Wonder Wart-Hog*, which Kurtzman introduced to a national audience. The future Monty Python member (it was at *Help!* that he met contributor John Cleese) and filmmaker Terry Gilliam was an aspiring cartoonist and humor magazine editor in Southern California who moved east to work at the magazine. Robert wrote a fan letter to the magazine offering encouragement and begging for news of future issues. He was keeping an eye out for any sign of life for his medium. Aside from humor magazines and gag cartoons, cartoonists were working with existing properties or creating new ones that fit into extant genres and publishing models. Precious few were looking at comics as a medium that could be reshaped to meet their own needs. Even fewer imagined entirely owning the rights to their creations.

Robert understood his potential, but he was also trapped in his head, worried that his ego would distort his talent, never mind that he hadn't been published yet: "A greatness complex can certainly be a hindrance when one is trying to look reality in the face… It always gets in the way. How can I be sincere in my work if subconsciously I'm only concerned with living up to the standards of greatness? I hope I can get rid of this drive for fame… It's false and stands in the way of knowing myself… I don't think it hurts a person to take out a few months, if they are fortunate enough to get the opportunity to dream and think about things. So many people go through life never really knowing who they are or what they want. Because they think it's wrong if they are not constantly accomplishing something… constantly achieving things… my father is that way… life to him is how much you can do and how good you are at it… the only way you can reach self-understanding is by getting away from it all… work, even books… You have to withdraw into yourself as much as possible, and concentrate only on getting at truth."

The brothers continued drawing together. Charles began to focus their two-man strips on a character named Elizabeth, drawn after the Disney child star Luana Patten. Elizabeth was a smart girl who had a crush on Jim, a twelve-year-old boy modeled on Bobby Driscoll, though she was a nuisance for him. Jim instead had a pubescent crush on Mabel, a twenty-something waitress and sometime prostitute. Mabel enjoyed toying with Jim as he ignored Elizabeth's overtures. Scripting each character, the brothers cracked jokes back and forth about intercourse, albeit, Robert said, from different perspectives: "For Charles, Jim was the love object and he identified with the frustrated, articulate, critical, neurotic Elizabeth, while for me Mabel was the love object, the girl of my dreams, and I had the immature Jim act out my desires to have contact with the female. For me Jim was an alter-ego—unselfconscious, a free spirit, a well-adjusted narcissist." These comics were an outlet for the brothers' sexual confusion, a way to explore their ideas without fear of discovery or, in Robert's case, any real physical contact.

In September 1961, trying again to find a purpose after two years in the local theater guild, Charles enrolled in Delaware State College, an otherwise all-Black institution. He wasn't enthusiastic, but it was either college or a job, and at least Delaware State, which was also free, allowed him a perverse rebellion against his parents and society. This motive wasn't enough to stave off boredom. He felt the other students were solely focused on entering the workforce, while he wanted to read and meditate. His grades slid down to Fs, and he was out by the end of the first semester. The only redeeming quality of this brief stint was that he met Tom Freeman (now Freeman T. Freeman) and had what could only be described as a platonic love affair. Freeman was one of sixteen children—his father was a minister in a one-room Baptist church in the poor, Black area of segregated Dover. Freeman was intrigued by Charles both because he was the first white person he'd come to know as a friend and because he was the only person he'd encountered with "wild ideas, philosophical notions about God, good and evil. He was so absorbed in big ideas that he barely had a personality of his own. Charles was slim in personality and hair and body. Charles would get so involved in his own talking and thinking that he would trip over his shoes."

Freeman knew he was gay, and told Charles as much, but the latter claimed to be less certain of his own sexuality. And there was a still deeper secret between them: Freeman told Charles that he'd encountered Chuck at a public toilet that doubled as a local cruising spot. Men signaled each other with a knock on their adjoining stall walls. One night, Freeman said, it was Chuck knocking. Charles told

Robert at the time, though they never discussed it afterward, save for some sarcastic jabs about the old man being a "queer." Sandra would chuckle as she referred to Chuck as "the gay marine." It was one more secret in the Crumb household, one more bottled-up urge finding expression in depression, rage, or art. Freeman assumed Charles himself was asexual: "I felt he lacked the intensity of sexual passion and desire that could have moved me to make actual sexual behaviors and activities a part of our relationship. He appeared developmentally to be sexually and sexual-emotionally, the age of those young boys he sought."

Charles and Robert visited Freeman at his home, and together they also visited the Baptist church, which the boys loved. Freeman remembered, "The jumping and shouting and testifying, and singing and zealous praying happened every Sunday. [We] must have been a scary lot. Grease from hair having been ironed that morning, sweating from the heat of pressed summer bodies, and hats shaking and bodies thrown about, and accents almost unintelligible, and smells from Sunday dinners." Freeman's family couldn't imagine what he saw in the Crumb boys, but they were kind and welcoming, far more so than when Freeman visited the Crumb home. Charles invited him over a few times, once coinciding with Viola, whose eyes widened when a Black man entered the living room. Bea tried to be nice and social, but "having no experience with Black families, would miss the mark." Freeman and Charles lost touch, but the relationship lingered in letters to Robert over the years, and every so often Freeman's family would wonder aloud about what ever happened to those nutty Crumb brothers.

In early 1962 Robert and Charles were still drawing comics and covers for their *Arcade*. Robert's work was becoming ever more ambitious. "Animal Town Comics" in *Arcade* number 22 (March 1962) is filled with an astonishing narrative of Fritz the Cat and his brother Jimmy's visit to their parents and old neighborhood in

Philadelphia. In the opening sequence traffic is frozen so they amble out to walk the streets, moving through Robert's precise urban streetscape of buses, signs, lampposts, stores, and row houses. Eventually Fritz and Jimmy learn that their parents, and everyone they know, has gone to the country. The sun sets as the brothers stroll past cars (Brombo Panda goes by) and Fritz laments, as Robert would for decades, the overpasses and highways destroying the old neighborhoods and littering the landscape with the ugliness of American commerce. They witness a suicide, pass by hobos, and crash a party. Eventually, Charles intercedes; panels fill up with a monologue on free will and cannibalism, a second "Fritz" appears, and the story disintegrates, with a final panel marked "DISCONTINUED DUE TO LACK OF INTEREST ON THE PART OF C. CRUMB." Despite, or perhaps because of Charles's withdrawal, Robert's work was of increasingly professional quality. He was confident with line, composition, characterization, setting, and the most difficult trick of all: smooth panel-to-panel narrative transitions. Like Barks, Kelly, and Stanley, he moves readers through a story without any pyrotechnics, as natural as breathing.

By now, Robert said, "[Charles] had no interest in getting a college education… he was already so inner-directed, he had lost any worldly ambitions that he might've had before, such as having a career as a cartoonist, or as an actor, or as a writer, or anything. I don't know what else he could have done other than living at home and being supported by my parents." In the spring of 1962, home seemed so hopeless. Bea and Chuck still screamed at each other, and now Bea would scratch Chuck's face, drawing blood. He could have stopped her easily enough, but he stood there and took it. That ashtray sailed into Robert's noggin; Bea disappeared and returned. Robert, like his mother, contemplated suicide. And still, that summer he dragged his feet. He and Charles roamed the tree-lined suburban lanes of Dover. But finally he couldn't take it anymore. In early August Bea and Chuck were once again screaming at each other. Bea chased her husband with a knife. The shouting was interminable. Robert, having developed a hormone-driven hot temper, became so angry that he tore his bedroom door off its hinges, stormed out of the house, and hitchhiked as far as the New Jersey Turnpike, where the police picked him up. At Robert's request they took him to the only other address he knew: Phil and Viola's apartment in Upper Darby, near Philadelphia. He stayed for five days, looked for work as a sign painter, and sat on the couch as his grandparents drank themselves to sleep. So miserable was the situation that when Bea arrived to retrieve Robert, she suggested they run away together. Instead, they returned home and once again moved, this time to the same neighborhood as Phil and Viola.

In September, Marty Pahls, now a college graduate with an apartment in Cleveland, wrote to Robert that he needed a roommate —it was time. Chuck bought him a bus ticket and gave him $10 and loaned him another $10. On October 8, 1962, Robert took the ten-hour Greyhound trip to Cleveland, documenting his feelings in *Arcade* 27. In that gray industrial city, with his pal's encouragement and nothing much to lose, he began again.

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PART II

1962–1966

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CHAPTER 4

I Go to Work

Cleveland welcomed the newly independent Robert with a job and a place to live with his best friend. Marty's basement apartment was just three dingy rooms, so he and Robert shared the bedroom. There was a couch and a small dining table against the living room wall, bulging and cratered from numerous coats of plaster and paint. Robert often would absent-mindedly draw on the wall while eating, gradually turning one enormous paint drip into a crackled tongue dangling from a cartoon face.

Out the door, up the basement stairs, onto Carnegie Avenue, Robert would catch the nearby rapid transit to American Greetings five days a week, clocking in at 7:48 a.m., hunched over one of the endless gray steel desks. When he clocked out at 4:48 p.m. on the dot, he was back on the road from one end of Cleveland to the other. The city Robert traversed each day was, Marty wrote, defined by "its gritty streets and buildings, sagging frame houses, smoky railyards, and the high weather-beaten bridges over 'the flats,' low-lying factory tracts strung for miles along the winding, copper-colored Cuyahoga River." He continued, "In 1962, one of the most spectacularly seedy areas of the city was near our own apartment, centered a few blocks away at East 105th Street and Euclid Avenue. Adjacent to Case–Western Reserve University, Severance Hall, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, it had been a middle-class Jewish area in the 1920s. But now it was the transportation hub, entertainment center, and focus of street life for Cleveland's enormous black population. A stroll down Euclid, from Cleveland Clinic and Abood's

Foods at East 100th, past the plywood-shuttered Alhambra Theatre and the humanity-clogged crossroads itself… to the Greyhound station at East 107th, took you past countless bars (all of them churning out electric jazz organ music), rib joints, conk parlors, storefront tabernacles, and, of course, Rebel's 13-Cent Hamburgers." The urban tableau unfolding in front of him fascinated Robert and found its way into spindly drawings of cityscapes and signage in his sketchbook.

Robert was still an outlier among the chatty postgraduate crowd. Unlike nearly everyone else he encountered, Robert had come straight to Cleveland from home—no college, no connections, just a head full of comics and records. Marty and his friends were highly educated, the first generation in world history in which college students outnumbered farmers and other laborers, and they were just affluent enough that they could work, take a break, and work some more without fear of suddenly falling into poverty. By 1969, the number of students had doubled. All this money and know-how meant that there was plenty to buy into—cars and houses and managerial jobs. And conversely, both the possibilities and the cushion around middle- and upper-middle-class young adults meant that they could also rebel socially and politically—that, too, thanks to Bob Dylan and the Beatles, was part of popular culture. Aside from the glories of the city streets, the cast-off material goods of a wealthy society were now available for purchase by young bohemians seeking to wrap their lives in a fantasy of a more authentic past. A curiosity seeker could walk into record stores and find desirable sides, or peruse bookstores for glorious collections of 1920s magazines; antique stores had streamlined, angular Art Deco plates and pitchers, furniture, and old radios.

When Robert arrived American Greetings was a half century old; at nearly fifty million dollars in annual sales, it was second only to Hallmark in the greeting card business. The product was conceived, drawn, produced, and printed inside the company by six hundred artists, writers, and creative technicians. In the bowels of that red brick building, Robert was in a demanding four-month training program learning how to prepare artwork for printing by translating an artist's color painting into the four separate layers required for printing: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. An image of a sun-dappled green leaf, say, would be divided into one silhouette for cyan and another for yellow. Combined they would make the green. The veins would be traced onto another layer for black, and any spots of light would require another layer of magenta. Each layer would be photographed individually to create the four-color printing plates. Robert sat at a light table and traced the individual color elements onto acetate sheets and then used an airbrush to reproduce the colors. The airbrush delivered a controlled gradual tone so that when the individual layers combined, the leaf could appear to have a smooth light-to-dark gradient, just like a photograph.

This process was vastly cheaper and more expedient than attempting to photographically reproduce a painting. Nearly every sizable publishing company either had an in-house mechanical reproduction team or farmed it out to entities tasked solely with these jobs. Until now he'd drawn directly from hand to paper—line, color, all on a single sheet without regard for how it might reproduce. Now Robert was learning how to break down his visual ideas into print-ready component parts. It was cold, he was miserable, but he was determined to keep his job and not end up back home as a failure, like Charles.

Marty dragged Robert out to the small but lively folk and poetry scene centered around La Cave, a recently opened basement coffeehouse on Euclid Avenue and a reliable midwestern tour stop in those years. They saw Buffy Sainte-Marie, Joan Baez, and other folk circuit performers, but they were more interested in the women than the earnest, flat music. Quiet and watchful, Robert observed the youth culture and began storing it away for future stories and drawings. Marty reported from the scene: “At La Cave (folk music bar here) dancing guys looking at girls & girls looking at guys, everybody ignoring the less-than-mediocre character trying to sing on the stage. You can see crewcut college kids in sports shirts strumming banjos and singing ‘spirituals’ and ‘blues’ [...] their smooth patter, being lionized by the Heights rich kids who drop down out of their boorish isolation for the Thursday night hoots.”

Through a mutual friend they met a neighbor named Harvey Pekar, a seething blue-collar twenty-four-year-old record collector and aspiring writer from Shaker Heights. He reminded Robert “of a classic beatnik. This wild, intense Jewish guy who talked in a jive lingo. He was a real seething character. He was so into the whole bebop thing, modern jazz, and talked about it obsessively. He had these kind of whacky modern art paintings on the wall in his place.” Pekar laid down a constant spiel, while Robert barely said a word. They were mutually bemused and surprised by each other. Pekar remembered, “There was weird-looking Crumb—over six feet tall, about 125 pounds, looked like he’d just gotten out of a concentration camp. But that was the way nature turned him out. He had thick glasses, hair falling in his face, front teeth that stuck out. Immediately I felt, God this guy has put up with more shit as a kid than I had. No girlfriend, the butt of jokes—you could tell where he was coming from.”

Pekar, like Marty, was hip to a broader range of reading material. The more sophisticated mix of those early years of the sixties included Paul Krassner’s then-burgeoning magazine *The Realist* (motto: “freethought criticism and satire”), founded in 1958 as a “*Mad* for adults” and run out of an office down the hall from its inspiration, it was thirty-two newsprint pages of interviews (Norman Mailer, Dick Gregory, Alan Watts, Lenny Bruce, and other male avatars of the cultural cutting edge), satirical writing, independent and trenchant reporting, and panel cartoons. Operating on a shoestring, Krassner combined all of this into a single publication that could keep Cleveland readers reasonably sharp. The magazine could be found in the Asphodel Book Shop, which also carried the mimeographed poetry booklets arriving from San Francisco and New York, like Ed Sanders's *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts* and Joe Brainard's *C Comics*, a magazine in which he drew popular characters like Nancy and Sluggo in comic strip collaborations with some of the best of the New York school poets, among them Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. The store also nurtured a micro-poetry scene led by poet d. a. levy. Robert, whom poet Kent Taylor remembers as "oozing with talent," was pulled into this orbit, eventually publishing drawings in projects by Walter Keller, Douglas Blazek, Joel Deutsch, and levy himself, despite having no special interest in the form. All of this activity from far-flung cultural quadrants brought the post-Beat generation together, laying some of the groundwork for the nascent counterculture to eventually blanket the country.

Robert was barely settled into Cleveland when he received an alarming letter from Charles: "There's been a family crisis. Mother and father have been at odds again. It's the worst one they've had since we moved. It's not over yet and I fear very much that things are destined to get even worse. Last night mother was pacing about in the living room, wringing her hands, weeping like a goddamned bathtub overflowing, lamenting over the unjust afflictions that the fates have beat her down with, and, like Job, cursing the day she was born, wishing for death, upbraiding herself because she had not the courage to commit suicide and crying out, 'Why, why, why, why?' Which is a good question!" When the holidays arrived, Robert was so reluctant to go home that he spent Christmas Eve at his American Greetings desk working on an issue of *Arcade*. The next day, he took a bus to Philadelphia. At home there was indeed constant talk of divorce; Maxon was still in high school but scarcely present; Sandra was binge drinking and disappearing for long stretches. Robert beat it back to Cleveland before New Year's Eve.

In early 1963 he inaugurated a new five-by-eight-inch hardcover sketchbook, intent on drawing a lengthy color story inspired by a fellow employee he had a crush on named Guntra. This became *Oggie and the Beanstalk*, later published as *The Yum Yum Book*. The story centers on Oggie, a toad with many of the same fatalistic, self-deprecating attitudes as his creator. He lives in an island city-state teeming with other animal characters; at university Oggie listens with increasing dismay and disinterest to his fellow students' high-flown philosophies, poetics, and tales of sexual conquests, more or less as Robert did in the scene around University Circle. Oggie, as Robert dreamed of, tries various identities, and eventually ascends to an Edenic planet where he encounters a huge zaftig naked woman named Guntra. After pages of misadventures, each saving the other from certain death, Guntra's kiss turns Oggie into a human man, and they make love. It's a story of derring-do, disenchantment, escape, and redemption through love and beauty, with a bit of a savior complex thrown in—all the virginal and naive elements of Robert's life thus far. It was, he wrote, about the "agony of being unloved and alone."

He penciled each panel delicately, then added color with Prismacolor pencils, and then inked the black lines over the color. This meant there could be no mistakes—this was to be a print-quality book drawn entirely by hand. He woke each workday at five a.m. to labor on the project until it was time to take the train to American Greetings. He was usually too tired to draw at night, but on weekends he could be found hunched over the book, even in the midst of parties. Marty took notice, then Pekar, and gradually, practically as a cocktail activity, Robert's cohort passed it around as it was in progress. After nine months, Robert finished the story in late 1963.

The work itself is remarkable for its vibrancy and humor. The storytelling is so precise and smooth, the colors so bright, and the body language of the characters so telling that it feels almost mainstream. In another world it would have been a hit and sold right alongside *Pogo* books. Robert thought he might woo the real-life Guntra, but this was an enormous effort with little hope of any return. In 1963, it was unthinkable that anyone would publish what we would now call a full-color graphic novel. There had been attempts at long-form picture narratives by numerous cartoonists, including R. O. Blechman, and the wordless picture stories of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward had enjoyed Depression-era popularity, but a lengthy color comic book for adults with nudity and sex? Impossible to imagine in the United States (outside of pornography) then or any time in the past.

Fulfilling his own artistic mandate, Robert was Oggie, and Oggie was Robert, minus love. He was struggling underneath the depression that would follow him for most of his life and hadn't yet developed coping tools. Marty wrote to Mike Britt about their friend: "Robert is very unhappy. Feels he can never give or receive love, feels chained to his unhappy past and unhappy future. He says he is incapable of feeling pleasure, only pain. Art for him is mainly an escape, but his pain is so ever-present he finds it inhabits or prevents working. He can't bring any major project to conclusion. You will find it hard to believe how much his work has improved, both in content and technique." Robert wasn't much more optimistic. In early 1963 he wrote to his old friend Hap Lenhart: "I'm writing this letter at my drawing table at seven-thirty in the morning here at 'American Greetings' Corporation, where I am a member of a body of [...] laboring ants—in a few minutes I will have to begin my work—dismal, sterile labor it is—labor that drains me of my energy and spirit." He was keenly aware, too, of the differences between the middle-class college students he saw at La Cave and the working-class population of the west-side factories. Each day he traveled between the two, noting the freedom and optimism of Marty's contemporaries and the downbeat fatalism of his coworkers.

To his relief, in February 1963 Robert was promoted from training to the Color Separations Department proper, and given a five-dollar raise, so he now received $65 a week. He toiled there with about forty other craftsmen from February to June in a large room partitioned into five-foot-tall cubicles. "Checkers" would walk the room, glancing over the partitions to make sure everyone was working. Then one day in early summer, a sharp, loquacious graduate of the Cleveland Art Institute named Ralph Shaffer stopped by. Though he had entered the American Greetings training program the same day as Robert, he was already the newly appointed art director of the Hi-Brow division, which produced the company's most sophisticated cards, aimed at consumers who fancied themselves too clever for old-fashioned sentiments. Shaffer spotted a vellum sheet taped to Robert's drawing table that he had covered with dense masses of characters—Oggie, Guntra, Fritz, Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy, innumerable cars, robots, old signs, and surreal grotesques. Astonished, Shaffer cut out a section and showed it to Hi-Brow chief Tom Wilson. Soon Wilson was down in Robert's cubicle examining his other drawings, and within two days Robert was promoted to the Hi-Brow studio and thus the upper echelons of the company's staff artists. There he became fast friends with thirty-year-old Hi-Brow writer John Gibbons, a quick-witted journeyman who was one of the funniest men Robert ever knew, capable of cracking him up with just a facial expression, but he was awkward when he wasn't making people laugh. Robert learned from Gibbons how to get through social situations by being entertaining, rather than attempting to be charming or intellectual.

The Hi-Brow division was encouraged, as in sophisticated advertising firms in New York and Los Angeles, to make play a part of work. A day's job could be attending a film or an art exhibition, or just sitting around brainstorming. The brightly lit office was festooned with wall doodles, the remnants of practical jokes, and the latest trendy publications, from the *New Yorker* to *Help!*, keeping the crew apprised on all the pop cultural phenomena they might funnel into cards. Most crucially for Robert's education, there were also piles of college humor magazines like the *Texas Ranger* and the *Harvard Lampoon*—student-run publications that combined satire, comics, photos, and copious advertisements. Edgy, but not out for blood, they often fed smoothly into mass culture—a path increasingly available to Robert. The *Texas Ranger* incubated *Help!* cartoonist and Robert's future colleague Gilbert Shelton, who served as its editor for two years, as well as two other future underground cartoonists: Frank Stack and Jack Jackson. The *Lampoon* birthed the *National Lampoon* magazines and films, and developed generations of writers for programs including *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons*.

Aside from educating himself, Robert's first job in Hi-Brow was to draw rough sketches based on the staff writers' ideas and texts. If Wilson approved the rough, then it would be passed to any one of the artists to make the finished art. After years of working with Charles, it was a snap. "All those guys used to come up to me when I first worked there and whisper to me, 'Crumb, slow down, you're making us look bad. You don't have to work that hard up here. They're going to up their expectations of our production level if you keep this up.' I thought they were kidding. I couldn't comprehend the idea they didn't want you to work as hard as you could… Suddenly it dawned on me I was getting paid more money to do less work—how unfair the whole system was. All these writers and artists and everything, but in this industrial setting." After just a few months he was drawing finished cards. He had his misgivings—he would never cotton to savvy, confident men like Shaffer and Wilson, and resented the idea of getting over on the backs of hardworking artisans—but he went along. Not quite an overnight success, but in only seven months Robert had ascended from anonymity to one of the better commercial art jobs in Cleveland at the remarkably young age of nineteen. And just as quickly as he'd gotten to the top, he looked around and realized that the job, and the place, was a dead end. Every artist and writer had a drawer of comic strips they were working on, a connection in television, some paintings they hoped to exhibit. He did not want to be thirty years old and still drawing greeting cards.

He stretched out where he could, using the opportunity to hone his chops. The Hi-Brow artists were mostly required to keep to the then-popular line-based, gender-neutral early-1960s style. As time went on, Robert dispensed with the somewhat twee, deliberately de-skilled big-head-little-body mode of the day, and soon his figures were individualized with volume and personality. Tom Wilson coached him on his lettering skills and encouraged him to make his figures ever more cute, which left a lasting impact on his aesthetic. Most cards featured a setup on the cover and a punch line inside: An old biddy on the front of a card admonishes a viewer, "This is a very naughty card," which opens up to: "It didn't even arrive in time for your birthday!" Another offers a tearful red devil on the front, which opens to "I've been lonely as the devil without you." Robert's cards were middling successes, each perhaps selling a few thousand in its lifespan of a few months. They were too individualized to sell to all markets, but he was known in the office as a brilliant young artist on the rise, or, as Ralph Shaffer put it, "Bob Crumb was Bob Crumb, and that's all he needed." In those pre-counterculture days, a generation of artists in their early teens, from Gary Panter to Charles Burns to Matt Groening, saw Robert's cards and knew something was different, something was slightly grungy and askew. They weren't being condescended to, nor sold a slick image of adulthood. This anonymous artist, like Carl Barks before him, was saying something different. What exactly that was wouldn't be articulated until 1967, but he was finding his voice.

Over the summer, buoyed a bit by a ten-dollar raise at American Greetings, Robert gave himself a vacation, visiting his family and checking out Atlantic City, contemplating taking a job as a portrait artist and chasing girls on the boardwalk. Back in Cleveland in August 1963, he caught up Mike Britt on the latest: "Gak! I'll be twenty in a couple of weeks… It's a very depressing thought… I will have had a completely kissless adolescence… a youth totally void of sweetness… I took a week's vacation not long ago and went home… It's all very sad… My mother had a miscarriage and is now in the agonizing process of losing her mind… She's just completely out of it… she's impossible to cope with… Sandra has no friends anymore and has become a reader of books… She's got to get out of there if she's ever going to enjoy life… Maxon just graduated and doesn't know what to do with himself… Carol got married recently and seems to be contented, though I fear for her 'cause the guy she married is kind of a bastard… He could make it miserable for her in later years… I hate to think of it. I hope Carol has the sense to call it quits if things get bad, but I dunno… She's awfully submissive. I don't know how Charles keeps going… It's amazing that he hasn't killed himself. He can't cope with the world… that's why he stays at home… yet I don't think he's really miserable… he's discontented though, which is natural. He spends all his time reading and writing… He writes hundreds and hundreds of pages in print much finer than this and no margins… He fills up notebooks but doesn't let anybody read any of it and the sad thing is that he always destroys what he has written… It's really a shame because he's just a great writer. He has given up art entirely, sold all his old comics and now is in the process of getting together a complete Shakespeare collection… I think he has finally come to realize that he must get away from home… I want him to make it to Cleveland… I'd send him the money now but I simply couldn't finance it."

Outside of work, Robert was expanding his artistic universe; he and Marty would go to the Cleveland Museum of Art some weekends, where Robert looked at Picasso and the French modernists while Marty attempted to pick up women. He closely studied a book of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, whom he pegged as the true father of surrealism; also in rotation was the fin de siècle German illustrator Heinrich Kley, whose pen-and-ink drawings of anthropomorphic machines and frolicking lovers were highly influential for Walt Kelly and the rest of the classic Walt Disney artists. Robert also drew a short-lived comic strip for the *American Greetings Corporation Late News Office Bulletin* in late 1963 and early 1964, "Roberta Smith, Office Girl" (named for a girl from the east side of Cleveland with whom he was briefly infatuated). His Roberta is a short, bespectacled perpetually perky employee, the kind of character who sees the good in every situation, falls in love with the office hunk, and happily faces rejection by telling herself she has job security. She's not sexualized, nor is she a vehicle for Robert's fantasies. These four-panel strips are an endearing portrait of office drudgery, optimism, and the single life.

In October Marty was writing copy for an employment agency and Robert was bringing home a good salary, so they rented a larger flat on the third floor of an old building with beautiful prewar details in University Circle. Robert bought a white upright piano, invited some of the Hi-Brow artists to come over and paint it, and began taking lessons. Even still, there was just one bedroom, so if Marty's girlfriend Barb spent the night, Robert was on the couch in the living room. In early January 1964, a bit flush with extra cash, he sent for his older brother. Chuck drove Charles to Cleveland to give a new life a go. Deposited at Marty and Robert's apartment, he promptly became infatuated with Barb (who in turn was fascinated by Charles's poetic soul), got drunk, vomited in the laundry hamper, forgot to flush the toilet, and flubbed a job interview at American Greetings. Realizing he'd blown it, Charles fled back to Philadelphia within a couple of weeks.

* * *

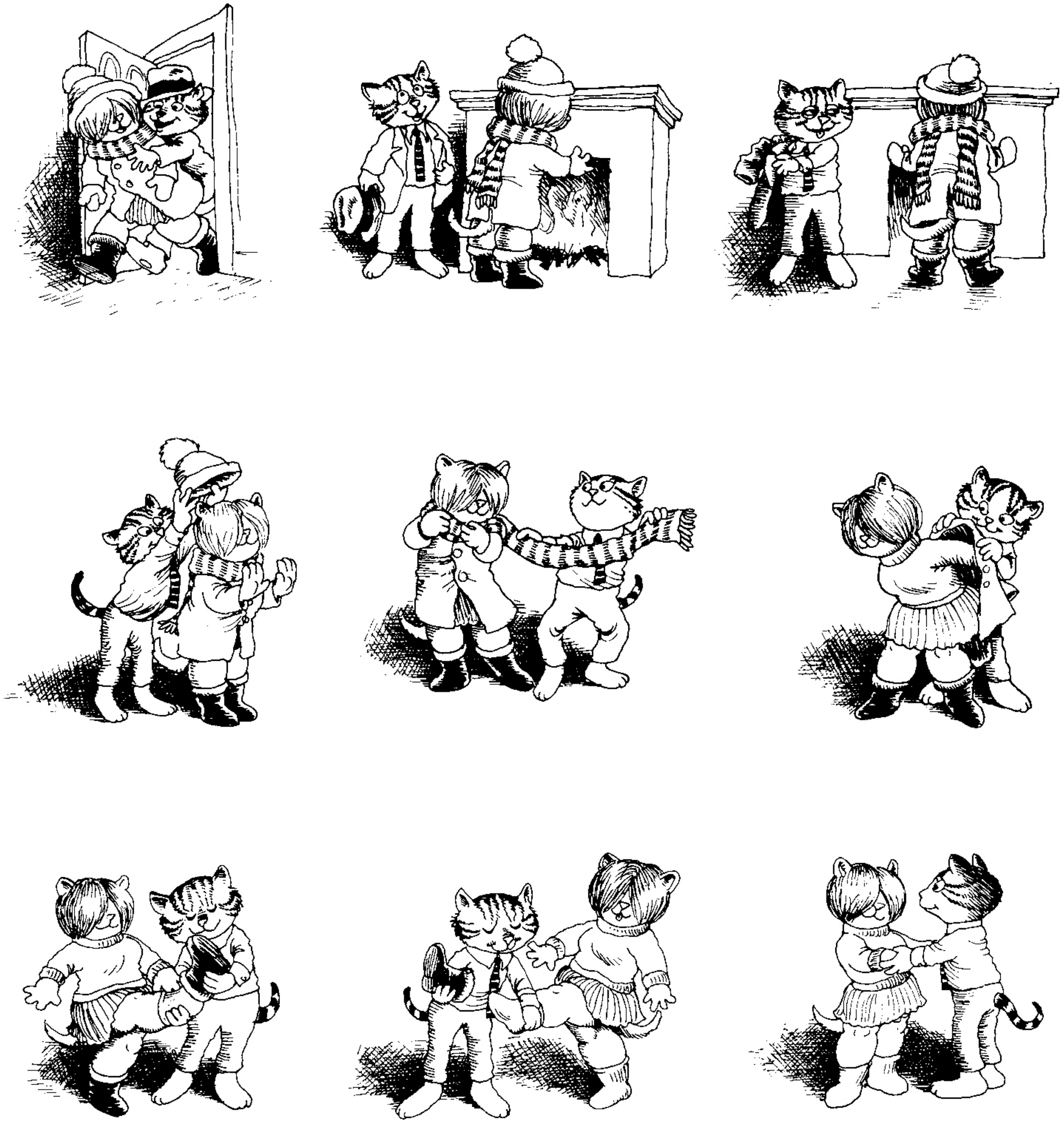
In the spring of 1964, eighteen months after he'd settled in Cleveland, Robert was a well-paid professional. He'd escaped the depressive force of his family and acquitted himself admirably by trying to help his older brother. He learned to drink bourbon and ginger ale with his colleagues at the local bar, Bud's Club 77; sometimes Ralph Shaffer took him to see drag races at a nearby racetrack. He was open enough to make friends with an artist acquaintance of Marty's named Liz Johnston. She was a well-traveled and studious art major who had graduated from Kent State University the year before. Liz remembered that the first time she visited their apartment, she walked into the living room and saw Robert facing the wall, drawing at his desk. He hardly registered her presence. When they got to talking, she found him smart, clever, and loquacious. He was keeping his artwork and notebooks in meticulous files and was careful to sign his work. Liz encouraged Robert to draw from life with her. She remembered: "Robert and I walked through shabby but elegant neighborhoods down side streets overgrown with shaggy lawns, trees that had never been pruned, grass growing up through the cracks in sidewalks and talked about everything. On Hessler Road, where we often walked, tree roots had pushed sidewalks into vertical rather than horizontal shapes and bushes planted in tiny front gardens grew out over the sidewalks to crowd pedestrians into the streets. We walked around in neighborhoods of beautiful old apartments with elaborate windows and hardwood floors throughout. We took all the exuberant green for granted never realizing such abundance was not a given but rooted in the rich Ohio soil and mild wet climate."

Until he met Liz, Robert used ordinary lead pencils for his sketchbook, not thinking to bring home his production tools. But Liz urged him to sketch with a Koh-I-Noor number zero Rapidograph, as she did. The pen houses a refillable and replaceable cartridge and produces an uninterrupted, uniform line width. "It is a vexatious, temperamental implement," he wrote, "but it is portable and produces a sharp, black line. The Rapidograph, with its precision, lends itself to contour drawing, that is, spontaneously drawing the outlines of things, a very helpful practice for any serious artist or illustrator." The impersonal nature of the line means that the touch of it tells all—there's no bravado with a Rapidograph, no way to finish an image with a flourish, as with the more flexible nib of a crow quill. Most artists would pull ink over and over a line to emphasize features or perspective, but Robert never did. Instead, he developed his own vertical hatching technique for lights and darks, and allowed the human quaver in his hand to show up on the page, teasing nuance out of a precision instrument. Robert's line is so recognizable it creates a unified visual field: where many cartoonists' backgrounds are interchangeable, everything in a Robert Crumb composition is entirely his own. In Robert's ever more complex mid-1960s images, his streetscapes, cars, women, and furniture exist entirely within a closed visual world taking shape now (having assembled his final issue of *Arcade* in June 1964) in sketchbooks that rarely left his side. He drew daily, recording ideas, faces, bodies, vignettes. Like *The Yum Yum Book*, his sketchbooks became a way to mediate the world—he could sit and draw as easily alone at home as at a bustling party—a way to both deflect and attract attention. Inevitably, someone would want to know just what he was drawing.

His relationship with Liz was platonic. She was fascinated by Robert's stories of his clan, so different from her own well-educated and supportive family. She remembers a kind but acerbic young man with an "unerring ability to identify a weakness or defense of a weakness." Marty, who saw himself as the Crumb brothers' de facto guardian, explained to Liz that women would never be attracted to Robert—that it was hopeless, which she took as both an insult on Robert's behalf and a challenge. She had borrowed *The Yum Yum Book*, knew the bodies Robert liked, and thought perhaps a bubbly personality might counter his own depressive tendencies. A former member of her sister's Girl Scout troop, Dana Morgan, came to mind. Liz invited Robert to her apartment to meet Dana in April 1964. When he arrived, Dana was clutching *The Yum Yum Book* to her chest: "I looked at it and fell totally in love with whoever had done this; I thought, 'My God'—and the artwork was just mind-boggling. I'd never seen anything like that. I was in love with whoever had done this, and then when I met him, he looked like he hadn't had a meal in weeks—and being Jewish, I immediately saw concentration camp survivors." They hit it off. Dana, an eighteen-year-old freshman at Cuyahoga Community College, was the zaftig moon-eyed girl of his dreams. "Liz left us alone at her apartment and we were talking and stuff, and the conversation kind of wound down, Dana was practically a child. But she had some problems, her parents had taken her to a psychiatrist for some pathological lying. The conversation wound down and we were sitting there and I just said something stupid like, 'You intrigue me,' then I just started kissing her and that was it."

Within a few weeks they lost their virginities together in his apartment and became briefly inseparable. "I was very attracted to her physically," Robert remembered. "Big, robust creature. She had a really beautiful face. And she was tall, physically strong and everything, big legs. So of course I was very strongly attracted to her at that point. But she glommed onto me so intensely that it kind of scared me off from her somewhat, it threw me into a quandary." Dana Morgan was from an upper-middle-class Cleveland Heights family. Her father, Russell, an easygoing, jovial man, owned a small lens manufacturing company. Her mother, June, was a homemaker with upper-class aspirations; she felt her daughter was overweight and frivolous and made cutting remarks in an icily calm voice. She reminded Robert of the evil queen in Disney's *Snow White*. At the time, Dana was playful, humorous; she strummed a guitar and painted, had ambitions to be a nurse or a social worker. She wanted to mother Robert, and he intuited Dana's need to be parented, too. He felt, justified or not, that leaving her at any moment would be abandoning her to a terrible fate.

Her parents weren't as sure about him: Dana described their meeting Robert: "They just couldn't fucking believe their eyes. My mother had all sorts of artistic pretensions, and to her a *comics* artist was just the trash of the art world." Robert had by then been out on his own long enough to have plenty of ambivalence, and some instinct for his own freedom. When Dana began talking about marriage and renting a house in the suburbs, Robert's fears went into overdrive: was he really going to work a square job and settle down in the suburbs as a family man so soon? Unable to make a decision, he panicked and, establishing a decades-long pattern, split town. He took a leave of absence from American Greetings and fled to New York City, figuring he might pick up some work from Harvey Kurtzman.

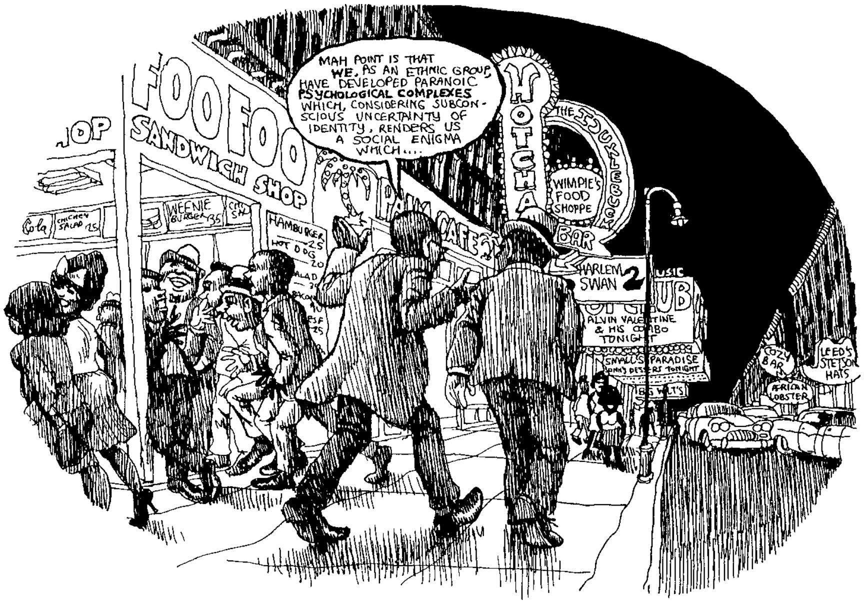


"Fritz the Cat," *Help!* no. 22, 1965.

Earlier in 1964 Robert submitted to *Help!* a pantomime strip of Fritz the Cat slowly undressing a feline companion, the punch line being that he's merely checking her for fleas. Kurtzman wrote back, "We think the little pussycat drawings you sent us were just great. Question is, how do we print them without going to jail. I'd like to send them to Hugh Hefner of *Playboy* just for kicks. Would you mind?" Robert was elated with this response from his hero. It was all he needed to make the trip to Manhattan that May. Like Terry Gilliam before him, he simply showed up at the *Help!* offices at Madison and Fifty-Second Street. Kurtzman assigned him to assist Gilliam, who in turn hooked him up with a rowdy group of Gilbert Shelton's friends from Texas in an apartment on West Ninety-Third Street. Robert ran errands for Gilliam and Kurtzman, both of whom commented on Robert's astonishing attention to detail in his compulsive Rapidograph sketchbook drawings.

Gilliam remembered, "His drawings gave no hint of what he looked like. We were surprised. Long, tall, stooped and somehow lost… He wandered around New York eternally in awe but never romanticizing, scratching away in his sketchbooks." *Help!* sent Robert to Harlem to complete a report in pictures, which was a already a regular feature in the magazine. The results were Crumb's finest group of drawings yet, though the set of fifteen images, like his Fritz story (once he agreed to draw panties on the girl cat), didn't appear until the January 1965 issue. Using his Rapidograph he rendered the neighborhood as a world of shimmying contour lines, tone added with the vertical hatching technique he'd developed. Robert managed to combine a documentarian's zeal for detail; a satirist's eye for the absurd; his usual commitment to "truth," no matter how unflattering; and his poetic sense of the sublime. One drawing centers a sign announcing "Another Good Home of Learning" from New York mayor Robert F. Wagner hung on a barbed-wire fence enclosing a busy playground and decrepit building. Another drawing begins just behind a duo animatedly talking about, per Ralph Ellison, "paranoiac psychological impulses" as they stride down a neon-lit 125th Street festooned with elaborate marquees, shop windows, and bright signs, one calling back to the Milford days, reading "FOO."

Having escaped to New York and, if there was such a thing, his dream job, Robert began to miss Dana. He was torn between his new lover and the possibilities of an exciting future out in the world: On May 6 he wrote to her, “I have been through the agonies of hell, my love, and it’s getting worse. Oh Dani, Danie, what should I do? I love you so enormously… I have been completely miserable without your warm gentle loving beautiful being… visions of you, tiny moments in our life together constantly fill my mind, and always, every second, there is a feeling of you, of your sweet, beautiful essence. I suppose you’re aware that when I left there was the possibility that we’d never see each other again… part of my intention for coming here (probably my main intention) was to see if I could live without you… to find out which force in me is the strongest… Am I ready to accept the great thing that has come to me without feeling that I’m missing out on something, that I’m trapped? Will I ever be ready? Should I get the restlessness out of my system now, all at once, and how long will it take?” Within three weeks he was back in Cleveland. Kurtzman couldn’t offer him a full-time job, Hi-Brow was only going to hold his desk for so long, and he really did miss Dana. He couldn’t resist the combined factors of sex, family, and codependency.


MAH POINT IS THAT WE, AS AN ETHNIC GROUP, HAVE DEVELOPED PARANOIC PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPLEXES WHICH, CONSIDERING SUBCONSCIOUS UNCERTAINTY OF IDENTITY, RENDERS US A SOCIAL ENIGMA WHICH....
FOO FOO SANDWICH SHOP
Cola
CHICKEN SALAD 25
WEENIE BURGER 35
HAMBURGER 25
HOT DOG 20
HOTCHA
THE SHUFFLEBUG
WIMPIE'S FOOD SHOPPE
BAR
CAFE
HARLEM SWAN 2
MUSIC
CLUB
ALVIN VALENTINE & HIS COMBO TONIGHT
SMALL'S PARADISE
COZY BAR
LEED'S STETSON HATS
AFRICAN LOBSTER

“Harlem Sketchbook Report,” *Help!* no. 22, January 1965.

Marty, more experienced with women and understanding both Dana’s needs and Robert’s vulnerabilities, was cold to Dana when she visited their apartment. So upon his return Robert moved into Liz’s place, dubbed “Apt. 4” because it was indeed apartment 4 at East 107th and Deering, on the old “Gold Coast of Cleveland.” It had high ceilings, beautiful hardwood floors, and ornate crown moldings in most rooms. It was, for a spell, a salon for the local bohemians, Liz and her boyfriend, musician Buzzy Linhart, among them. That summer, Robert lived the life of a well-paid Hi-Brow artist. He and Dana enjoyed languorous weekends together in bed or on excursions. On July 4 the lovebirds spent the day walking and taking photographs along the riverbank underneath Chagrin Falls, Ohio, a bucolic town east of Cleveland. Dana, her hair at her shoulders, wore jean shorts and a long oxford cloth shirt. Robert wore his suit (no tie, though), his hair neatly combed as he poses like a smiling fool in the sole photo of him in the booklet he made of that day: *A Day in the Woods with Dana*. This was one of a handful of gifts Robert made for Dana—private comics and illustrated poems that declared his love for her. Soon there was *For You with Love*, an illustrated version of a poem by Louis Untermeyer, to which Robert added a frolicking frog and Dana's nude body, and later, *The Danie Book*, a (very) thinly veiled ten-page story of a little girl named Danie whose evil stepmother torments her, and whose lighthearted love for a flower makes her an outcast among the villagers.

All this was fun, so long as it stayed private. But one day at Apt. 4, the phone rang for Dana. Whoever answered the call casually told June Morgan that her daughter couldn't come to the line because she was in bed with Robert. Flirtation was one thing, premarital sex was another. This was a catastrophic turn. Summoned to the Morgan home in Cleveland Heights, Robert was grilled by June about his intentions and prospects, and eventually agreed to marry Dana. It was 1964 in the Midwest, and for the Morgans it might as well have been 1934. They were eager to unload their hapless daughter. "Why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free," June told Dana. Robert, guilt-ridden and easily pushed around in anything unrelated to his artwork, couldn't find a way to say no.

He loved her, he thought, and she loved him. They were two lost souls who had found one another! Marty tried to talk Robert out of it, as did Liz Johnston, who says, "I kept telling him the idea was for him to get a little experience with girls, and not to be devoured whole into a tentative relationship, which was just getting started. I was very, very worried about the situation and tried once more to talk him out of any sudden moves, like getting married to someone he just met. He was grim but determined." "Grim but determined" is not exactly the phrase anyone is looking for in a romance, but such was the moment that summer.

In late July, this time with Dana's approval, Robert once again went to New York. He had two purposes. First, he needed some space to himself. Was he really going to go through with it? He wasn't sure. But if he was, then he wanted to clear seven hundred dollars in three weeks—far more than he was making in Cleveland on cards alone—

enough to live for a while in Europe on their honeymoon. While walking in Greenwich Village he happened on a tourist portrait gallery open to the sidewalk. Inside five or six artists sat with easels at the ready: $2.50 for a five-minute profile, $5 for a face. When Robert asked about a job, he was told the same owner, a hardened fellow named Ike Denkenberg, had another shop in Atlantic City and hoped to capitalize on the 1964 Democratic National Convention that August. After he made a brief stop back in Philadelphia, Bea drove him to Atlantic City, where he found a cheap rooming house and went to work drawing quick portraits (signed Sanford Goines) from four p.m. to midnight. When Denkenberg became jealous of Robert's friendships with a couple of the female artists and soured on the young artist, Robert left the studio to pair up with an enterprising caricaturist who had a booth just inside the convention hall. Robert airbrushed shirts with monster hot rods and drew snazzy charcoal-on-paper caricatures. The attendees, in party mode, were ready for a quick sketch and some light banter, not to mention generous with their tips. Robert even attempted to chat up Norman Mailer, whose attention shifted as soon as a blond woman approached.

Robert was, at least in his letters to Dana, committed. On August 5, he promised her that he'd take care of the marriage license. Five days later, having spoken to her on the phone, he rhapsodized to Dana, "The certainty of our oneness lifts me… and I feel completely at peace… but this physical distance must not go on… I need to be near you too much… to feel the warmth of your love close to me." Having added long-distance work from Hi-Brow to his boardwalk gigs, he was now working solid from ten a.m. to one a.m. Dana, meanwhile, was planning the wedding and the honeymoon, and trying to get birth control pills. On August 22 Robert received an invitation to his own wedding, a bit of mail, he wrote Dana, that was "a little frightening." "It's like the time I got this letter that said, 'you are ordered to report for physical examination.'" (His eyesight and sunken chest made him 4-F.) “We will be very happy together… Danie… I love you… love you…” That push and pull was the crux of their marriage. As fast as Robert was scrambling to earn money, the life around him was going even faster.

He and Dana planned a trip for their parents to meet and for her to meet the Crumbs. Chuck and Bea, en route from a trip to New Richland, picked up Dana in Cleveland, awkwardly met the Morgans (“They’re the four most incongruous people you could possibly bring together,” Robert wrote at the time), and then went on to Atlantic City. The evening his fiancée and his parents arrived, Robert was strolling along the boardwalk hand in hand with a young woman he’d just met. Down the way he spotted Dana leaning on the railing looking out at the ocean. He dropped his paramour’s hand, and she appeared to just fade out of his vision. His bohemian fantasy was over, though his inner conflict about a committed relationship was not. He greeted Dana, and the two couples proceeded to Philadelphia.

At the Crumb home, Charles, Max, and Sandra promptly set about testing his fiancée with sarcasm, needling comments, and outlandish questions. She was understandably intimidated and put off. Bea, who liked Dana and probably recognized and certainly related to the idea of escaping into marriage, asked if Robert really thought he should get hitched so young. She was gentle and lucid as she tried to persuade him that it wasn’t too late to call it off. Chuck, meanwhile, had always said Robert would marry “the first one who comes along.” Bea, like Liz, and, more bitterly, Marty, knew the marriage was a mistake. It was a tough visit. As soon as the bus left the Philadelphia station, Robert burst into tears: “I was completely overwhelmed with sorrow and sadness over the fates of Charles, Sandra, Maxon, my mother, my father… It was the most whole hearted sob session I’ve been through since I was a child. It was unwilled and uncontrollable.” It had been just two years since Robert left home and found an entire world welcoming him—art, work, sex, all out there away from his tight, if mad, family universe. He was soon to enter an ambivalent marriage, continue his nine-to-five job, and, like any escapee, he worried about those he was leaving behind.

Robert and Dana were married September 11, 1964, at the Unitarian Center in Cleveland, with a reception at the Morgan home. They had known each other barely five months; she was eighteen, he twenty-one. The American Greetings gang was there, Chuck, Bea, Marty, all dressed up and clinking wineglasses. Tom Wilson agreed to keep Robert on the job during the honeymoon and on behalf of the Hi-Brow crew gifted him an oversized bookbinder's sample to take along as a sketchbook. Russell Morgan booked a big hotel room for the couple in downtown Cleveland. "Laying there in bed next to each other, Dana just burst into tears saying, 'I don't want to be married!' I was so confused and overwhelmed by the whole thing. The fact that this woman said she's in love—the first time in my life, a woman really seemed to be heavily into me and that was kind of nice. I really did not want to get married. I told her that, and I tried to be reasonable and explain things." They stayed married anyway. What else were they to do? They each needed the life raft the other represented, even if neither wanted the resultant adult responsibilities. Robert gave Dana *The Danie Coloring Book*, twenty-four pages of odes to "precious, cute, wonderful, gentle, warm, kind, sensitive, angelic" Dana. When Robert entered the book "she met this cool, hip, young artist. They fell in love. Color Danie's parka red. Color them both very virgin. And color them both very horny." The next page has Dana primly sitting on Robert's knee: "Now they are married and respectable, and Danie is as sweet and gentle as she always was, the hip young artist is happier than he ever was before, color him well adjusted." They took a bus to New York, and then set out for Europe on a Swedish freighter, uncertain of what they'd just done, and what lay ahead.

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CHAPTER 5

Life on the Cusp

Robert and Dana soon transformed their honeymoon into an extended stay in Europe as he entertained a fantasy of living there as an itinerant artist à la Henry Miller. Following a few days in London and three weeks in Zurich, in October 1964 they settled into the bottom half of a house in Minusio, Switzerland, a tiny mountain village overlooking Lake Maggiore. After paying their rent in advance they were left nearly penniless, so Robert immediately began working on cards for American Greetings, sending the finished art back to the office by airmail while Dana pilfered food from local markets, the unfamiliar packaging designs of which Robert recorded in his sketchbook, along with portraits of Dana, local characters, and still lifes.

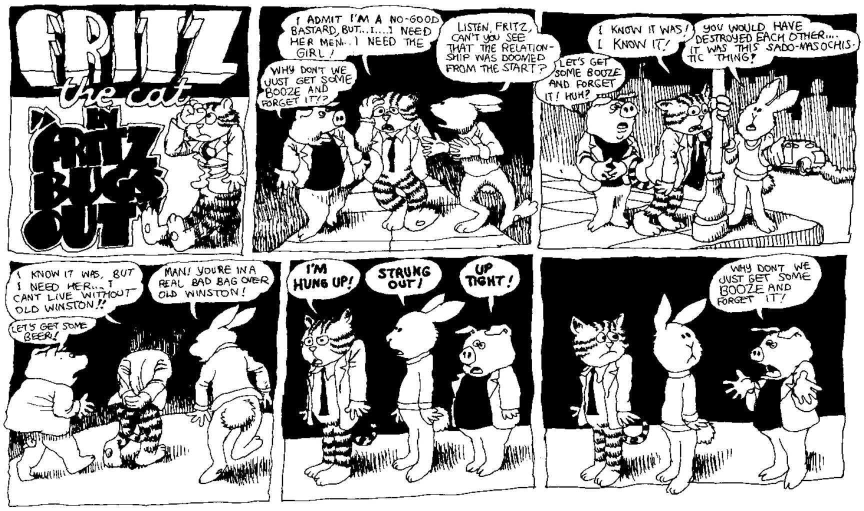
Despite all their internal doubts, in Minusio they settled into life as a couple. Together, they were starting fresh in a dreamy place away from dreary Cleveland and all their friends and family, free to relax. Robert had never left the United States before and was absorbing entirely new sensibilities, from the grandeur of the Swiss landscape to the formal social customs. They took long walks on the mountain road, marveling at the natural beauty. One night they heard, and then saw, “a lone woman standing out on a little bluff overlooking the lake, the sparkling lights of the village below, yodeling her little heart out.” Their landlady urged the young couple to visit the local cafés and meet other young people, but Robert and Dana were far too shy to meet new people in a strange place where neither spoke the language.

Dana wrote to Marty, “Robert has changed completely from the person he was a few months ago. He is as zany as I have become and I love him more than I ever thought it was possible for one person to love another. Our love continues to grow & bloom and fill our world with vast sweetness.” Robert agreed: “We’ve both come out of ourselves to each other to an incredible extent and the freedom we enjoy with each other is the greatest thing I’ve ever experienced… and our lovemaking gets better and better and more fulfilling and satisfying.”

When they weren’t luxuriating in each other’s company, Dana read and kept house while Robert drew. He was filling that oversized sketchbook with a lengthy story that became “Fritz Bugs Out,” reintroducing Fritz the Cat as a sly, sensitive, and adventurous feline on the make. The response to Robert’s Harlem drawings, as well as “Fritz Comes on Strong” in the January issue of *Help!*, was positive enough that Harvey Kurtzman wrote to Robert with the proposal of a sketchbook report on Bulgaria. He’d heard it was just like George Orwell’s *1984*, so with $300 for expenses, why not go have a look behind the Iron Curtain? In early February 1965, Dana and Robert caught the Orient Express to Sofia, pulling into the station long after dark. The next morning they were given an itinerary by the government tourist office; they visited a folk-dancing performance, the art museum, the local art institute, a department store, and a factory.

A drawing of a gloomy industrial assembly line festooned with propaganda posters is labeled, “Factory workers are more productive in colorful, inspiring surroundings.” The report ends with an image of Robert himself looking at three young collegiate women: “Anyhow, some western influences do seep in…” This was not exactly trenchant commentary, but, as with his Harlem report, he knew how to communicate through juxtaposition, characterization, and tone. Robert found the drab environment of Sofia strangely appealing and told the tourist ministry agent as much—they offered to help him and Dana resettle there if he wished. Nevertheless, after five days they headed back to Minusio, where Robert sent the batch of art to Kurtzman in New York and finished "Fritz Bugs Out" in his sketchbook.

The twenty-two-page story is a romp touching on everything Robert had learned about both comics and adulthood up to that moment. It's sharper and more self-aware than his graphic novel, *The Yum Yum Book*, from two years earlier, and by the sheer quantity of characters and settings, vastly more ambitious. Comics with this level of complexity are usually planned out in pencil and then inked. Breaking from tradition, Robert improvised each twelve-panel page, beginning at the top left corner and flowing in Cleveland details from memory: lunch counters and corner bars, row houses with hardwood-floored apartments piled high with books and magazines balanced against rickety tables.


FRITZ the cat IN FRITZ BUGS OUT
I ADMIT I'M A NO-GOOD BASTARD, BUT...I....I NEED HER MEN...I NEED THE GIRL!
WHY DON'T WE JUST GET SOME BOOZE AND FORGET IT!?
LISTEN, FRITZ, CAN'T YOU SEE THAT THE RELATIONSHIP WAS DOOMED FROM THE START?
I KNOW IT WAS! I KNOW IT!
YOU WOULD HAVE DESTROYED EACH OTHER.... IT WAS THIS SADO-MASOCHISTIC THING!
LET'S GET SOME BOOZE AND FORGET IT! HUH?
I KNOW IT WAS, BUT I NEED HER... I CAN'T LIVE WITHOUT OLD WINSTON!!
LET'S GET SOME BEER!
MAN! YOU'RE IN A REAL BAD BAG OVER OLD WINSTON!
I'M HUNG UP!
STRUNG OUT!
UP TIGHT!
WHY DON'T WE JUST GET SOME BOOZE AND FORGET IT!

"Fritz Bugs Out," 1964–65.

There are still bits of the artist in his protagonist, but now Fritz is practically aspirational, channeling Robert's fantasies of life among the beautiful and the hip at La Cave. We meet Fritz as he's commiserating with Fuzzy (brought over from Charles's comics) and

Heinz (a pig) about his breakup with Winston. Fritz returns to his pad, inadvertently sets the building on fire, and takes to the avenues. Eventually, Fritz preaches to a crowd his version of a monologue that Robert would return to over the years: Willie Howard's hilarious satire of labor bosses, "Comes the Revolution," released as a 78 record in 1940 and a Marty Pahls favorite. "You have carried heavy burdens for the bosses!" he proclaims. "You have sweat for the bosses! The bosses, they ride around in limousines! The bosses, they're eating strawberries and cream!" The story tumbles through three more seductions, a Kerouac-ian road trip, freight train hopping, and finally a meandering walk through a car junkyard, over a bridge, down an alley, and back to a party in full swing. In this, and future strips, unlike the defined characters of Carl Barks's ducks and John Stanley's kids, Fritz is an elastic vehicle for Robert to explore literary and pictorial ideas without concern for his character's internal life.

Soon after their Sofia adventure, Robert and Dana had to leave their place in Minusio so they decided to try out Copenhagen—they nearly starved. From their handy copy of *Europe on $5 a Day* they selected a cheap rooming house in the city, settled in, and waited on a check from American Greetings. A week went by, and then another. Dana stole food from markets to keep them fed. They snuck into a bathhouse and walked the boulevards at night, wishing themselves into the shop windows. Robert channeled their dire situation into a series of autobiographical comics entitled *The Silly Pigeons*, depicting a small sad bespectacled pigeon and a larger boisterous pigeon struggling with an uncooperative radiator. While there, he also began his other 1965 Fritz tale, the fifteen-page "Fritz the Cat Special Agent for the CIA," influenced in equal parts by the mid-decade James Bond–inspired spy craze, his adventures in Sofia, and a brief exploration of a China sketchbook report for *Help!*. When the check arrived at last, the newlyweds decided it was time to head home—no more foreign shenanigans until they had a bit more dough to stay afloat.

* * *

Robert and Dana arrived back in Cleveland in early May 1965. Robert returned to his old job, and the couple settled into a Cleveland Heights apartment furnished with a haul of furniture bought for $100 at the Salvation Army. They fell back into their loose circle of illustrators, writers, poets, musicians, and record collectors. Marty wasn't too much on the scene—he and Dana's mutual antipathy was now entrenched, and he was also back and forth to Philadelphia attempting to woo another Crumb away from home: Sandra.

Life at the Crumb house had continued its downward slide, engulfing the two youngest siblings now. After graduating from high school in 1963, Maxon had moved back home. Like his older brothers, he seemed paralyzed by indecision. His untreated epilepsy filled him with dread and made him feel like a perpetual outsider. But nothing in his life could have predicted his sudden eighteen-month-long pattern of sexual assault in the mid-1960s. Maxon rode the trains of Philadelphia for hours at a time, silently sneaking up behind a female passenger and yanking down whatever he could grab on to—pants, underwear, skirt—and then dashed off elated, as though it was a prank. He was never caught—that would come later—but he admitted it to his siblings as though it was a quirk he couldn't control rather than a crime. If Chuck and Bea ever suspected anything, they didn't act on it. As his urges abated, Maxon worked as a car mechanic at a local garage and found a steady girlfriend. Sandra, meanwhile, had replaced Robert as Charles's favorite student. He taught her the block lettering he and Robert used and lectured her about his philosophies of love and beauty. She was eighteen now, considered herself sexually adventurous, and was prone to getting blackout drunk. Like her brothers, she was cynical, creative, and culturally curious.

Marty, now twenty-five, had decided he was in love with Sandra, announcing it to Robert and Dana while they were in Switzerland. Sandra, while not averse to Marty's affections, was not terribly interested, either. She knew two things: First, she was likely a replacement for Robert with the added benefit of sexual intercourse; second, Marty was a way to leave home. Dana and Robert both wrote to him encouragingly, and in Robert's case, with startling prescience: "If you can get Sandra away from Philadelphia, it will be the best thing anybody has ever done for her, and M. Pahls will have saved another Crumb from a disastrous life of sadness… Charles won't hate you… if he's as intelligent as I think he is and still has any sanity left, he will realize that for Sandra to get away is the best thing for her… I think my parents are a lost cause… their lives are pretty much hopelessly ruined… sometimes I see Charles as an inevitable suicide… each day he stays there he gets closer to it… Maxon will get away only to go mad in later life…" Dana chimed in: "I agree with Robert that you should get Sandra out of Philadelphia and away from the whole family. Charles is the saddest human being I have ever known and I only hope that his intellect will convince him that you are doing a great thing. Robert plans to write & tell her to go with you no matter what Charles & Mr. & Mrs. Crumb say. If only she could somehow truly realize how vital this break would be to her future happiness." Charles, however, couldn't help but resent Marty's absconding with another sibling and protégé.

The fracture of the Crumb family, its drift into criminality and mental illness, was exceptional even for the chaos of the latter part of the sixties. In 1965, families were splintering across the country for far more benign reasons: politics, education, and music gave the youth an articulate form of generational rebellion as they pulled away from their parents. The tectonic plates of culture were shifting, tossing everyone into alternately elated and uncertain mind states.

After eight months in Europe, the shifting currents in America were especially noticeable to Robert: “That whole hipster counterculture thing had coalesced even more and was moving even faster,” he said. “Everybody that I knew in Cleveland was moving in that direction. When I came back there was a feeling of excitement in the air.” Just a couple of weeks after they returned, Robert and Dana were among the quarter million people in attendance at the April 17, 1965, March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam, organized by Students for a Democratic Society. It was a Saturday, and some in Robert’s Cleveland contingent were surprised that no one was home at the Capitol building to receive their demands. In any case, it was something to do that weekend. Two primary facets of social life were colliding just then: political action for civil rights and against the war, and a growing consumer culture. College students and young adults with money to spare felt that every form of expression had to be sampled, from protest to narcotics. Like many others of his generation, Robert saw it not just as a culture of music and fashion to belong to, let alone buy into, but rather a space in which to remake themselves and their communities from top to bottom, questioning all values, authority, and social structures, entirely outside of their cultures of origin.

One Saturday afternoon in June 1965, Dana and Robert took their first LSD trip. Before either had ever so much as puffed a joint and felt their mind gently expand, they took a staggering six hundred micrograms each of pharmaceutical LSD. The average dose was one hundred micrograms. In those days, LSD was legal if prescribed by a doctor, and Dana had swiped two sealed ampules from a friend’s refrigerator, telling Robert they came from a psychiatrist. With no labels, let alone instructions, the couple each downed the entire dose. The psychedelic experience was a revelation for both of them:

"Everything poured from a vertical crack or aperture, flowing to the left and to the right… energy flowed forth from this center line, equally to one side and the other… bi-cameral… two sides, vibrating against each other… The 'trick' was to get between the two sides, to open the crack, to penetrate the 'cosmic vagina'…"

Dana felt she was passing through the birth canal. Unfortunately, what she thought was amniotic fluid was Robert vomiting on her. His trip, initially cosmic, had climaxed in a hellish vision of the apocalypse. After this brutal comedown, he went to work that Monday at American Greetings. When he couldn't quite form sentences, his colleagues were first worried and then intrigued. By the end of the year many of them were also taking LSD. For Robert, there is life before LSD and life after. Nothing was ever the same. "When I took LSD I realized I was trying to be smart all the time, trying really hard to be as smart as I could. It's a tendency I have. And LSD made me realize that doesn't matter at all. Forget it. If you trust yourself deeply enough you don't have to try to be smart. If you trust your instincts, and your instincts aren't impaired somehow, it's all right there."

LSD, first developed in 1938 by Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland, bubbled under the surface of western culture until the 1960s. The CIA, intrigued by its potential as a drug for mind control, experimented with it extensively on soldiers and defense contractors in the 1950s and '60s. Psychiatrists began conducting supervised experimental treatments with it as early as 1953. By the end of the 1950s it was quite popular among the upper echelons of society and culture—*Life* publisher Henry Luce and actor Cary Grant famously swore by its therapeutic powers. Dr. Timothy Leary led government-funded experiments at Harvard University from 1960 to 1963, along with a then-young assistant professor, Richard Alpert (later Baba Ram Dass), until the university decided everyone was a bit too enthusiastic. By 1965, LSD was part of the public discourse, and far from just goofy visions of lava lamps and spinning dancers, it was instrumental in finalizing the break from convention for Robert's generation. Carl Oglesby, former president of Students for a Democratic Society, articulated it best: "The acid experience is so concrete. It draws a line right across your life: before and after LSD in the same way you felt that your step into radical politics drew a sharp division. People talked about that, the change you go through, how fast the change could happen on an individual level and how liberating and glorious it was [...] It's not necessarily that the actual content of the LSD experience contributed to politically radical or revolutionary consciousness—it was just that the experience shared the structural characteristics of political rebellion, and resonated those changes so that the two became independent prongs of an over-arching transcending rebellion that took in the person and the State at the same time."

Soon LSD was out of the laboratories and into the basements. In response to the first wave of home-brewed LSD hitting the streets, Congress declared its illicit sale and manufacture a misdemeanor in 1965. Three years later it was outlawed entirely.

A little enlightened and newly confident after an adventurous honeymoon and mind-exploding experience, Robert began philandering with the bohemian set. He had affairs with three or four women, which led him to believe that "Dana was not that attracted to [him] sexually. She only wanted [him] because she just wanted whatever was possible for her to get a hold of, she wouldn't let it go." This may be true, but it was equally hard for Robert to let go. They both grew up feeling inadequate and undesirable, and had found solace with one another. But Robert needed to continue escaping—escape from home, escape from Charles, escape from Cleveland, escape from every vestige of a conventional life until he was finally free. Dana felt that she'd already escaped and found a new home in her marriage. She wanted her own family to care for.

Neither of them was emotionally mature enough to realize that their desires were completely incompatible.

* * *

In August 1965 Harvey Kurtzman called from New York and offered Robert the assistant editor job just vacated by Terry Gilliam at *Help!*. Robert's "Fred the Teenage Girl Pigeon," in which Fritz, as a celebrity, seduces and then eats Fred, was published in the May issue, and his Bulgaria report appeared two months later. Trying his luck in New York seemed like a good next step, and Dana was eager to explore a new city together. They made the big move to a tiny apartment on East Eighty-Third Street. On what was to be his first day of work, Robert took the subway down to the magazine's midtown offices, where he found a downcast Kurtzman leaning against the corridor wall while men carried desks and filing cabinets out of the office. Kurtzman told Robert that the magazine was closing. Sales had been sliding for months, so publisher Jim Warren, affirming his reputation for impulsiveness, shuttered the magazine with little notice to make way for a couple of new horror magazines rooted, ironically, in the EC comics of the previous decade.

Kurtzman, however, felt responsible for his would-be protégé. He had his own life raft: a full-color comic strip for *Playboy* entitled *Little Annie Fanny* in which the titular young woman explored the culture of the day Candide-like, and inevitably wound up naked. It was hardly *Mad* but it was a living. The amount of work required to execute the strip far exceeded what Kurtzman and his collaborator Will Elder could produce, so some of the old *Humbug* gang helped on the pages. Robert tried out for a background-coloring gig, unsuccessfully laboring with watercolors on a couple of panels. Kurtzman kindly advised that he was best at doing his own stuff and sent him to all the contacts he could think of: Robert interviewed at

Mad, where he was informed they didn't need any new talent; then he visited EC and *Mad* artist Jack Davis, who was frantically storyboarding television commercials in the suburbs; Robert couldn't maintain that pace and found the assembly-line work oppressive and depressing. Kurtzman wrote to Shel Silverstein, enclosing some of Robert's work "hot out of the Rapidograph," so that young Crumb could be introduced to their mutual employer *Playboy* and Hugh Hefner. No luck there, either.

Finally, Kurtzman sent him to Topps chewing gum and Woody Gelman, an erstwhile contributor of prewar cartoon reprints to *Help!*. Gelman was another Brooklyn boy, who'd worked for Fleischer Studios on its *Popeye* cartoons, drawn numerous funny animal and children's comic books, and run the Product Development Department at Topps since the 1940s. He oversaw the design of the postwar collectible baseball card, Bazooka Joe, and Mars Attacks, among other pop cultural phenomena. Gelman would remain there for most of his life, pulling in some of the greatest talents in the business: Basil Wolverton, Wally Wood, Jack Davis, and soon enough Art Spiegelman and Robert Crumb. He was, like Kurtzman, a man dedicated to the past and present of comics and graphics. Spiegelman characterized him as a genuine talent magnet: "If somebody had something special he would do everything he could to nurture it. As a failed cartoonist he knew what he was looking at when he saw Crumb." What he saw when Robert presented himself, he later said, was "one of the few true geniuses that [he'd] ever met." He put him to work immediately. For two months Crumb took the Lexington Avenue subway out to Bush Terminal in southeast Brooklyn, what is now called Industry City: the whole neighborhood smelled of the bubblegum produced there; Robert would return home reeking of the sweet stuff. Robert continued his commercial art education in both technique and, on the wan faces of the older men around him, career paths. He and Dana continued taking acid and, thanks to Dana's job at the Roosevelt Hospital pharmacy, added methamphetamine to the mix, making that Rapidograph skitter across the page ever faster.

Robert cranked out images and lettering for a set of "Monster Greetings" cards, cashing in on the mid-1960s funny monster fad of which *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* television shows were the prime movers. He did a bit of drawing and research work for Gelman's Nostalgia Press, one of the earliest serious publishers devoted to the history of the medium. Robert and Dana spent weekends in Gelman's Long Island basement combing through prewar newspaper clippings and filing original artwork by *Little Nemo in Slumberland* cartoonist Winsor McCay, *Flash Gordon* artist Alex Raymond, and other comic strip greats, giving both a rare opportunity to live in the cacophony of lines and hues and dialects of cartooning history. Gelman longed to publish a magazine of his own, for which he commissioned Robert to produce two historical features not unlike his sketchbook reports. The first was an illustrated article entitled "The Small, Small Businessman," about the enterprising kids of the Depression in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Robert and Dana spent hours in the New York Public Library researching the clothes, cars, buildings, and people of the time for a period-accurate set of images. The second assignment was a bit closer to Robert's critical heart: "The Heap Years of the Auto—1946–59," signed "Bob Crumb," in which he offered what would have been an unusually public summary of American culture: "As we stand on the threshold of 'The Great Society,' scaling new and dizzying levels of hipness and sophistication daily, let's not forget that we've only just come out of what has been dubbed by the merciful, 'The Post War Era.' The blah tag fits. Though still a bit close to us for truly objective analysis, it's pretty generally agreed that those years pushed mediocrity as a way of life. It was the 'The Age of Bland Achievements,' an era of complacency and indifference. All that was worthy, and there wasn't much, was ignored. Amorphous, inoffensive, uncommitted physical and mental blob and glob were exalted. It was a time of Ozzie Nelson, Loretta Young, *The Mickey Mouse Club*, Richard Nixon, and Hawaiian shirts. It was an era that saw the birth of television as the tyrannical cyclops of the living room, prefab, look-alike housing developments, unlovely shopping centers, motivational research, the Cold War, back-yard barbecues, fall-out shelters and the aimless, useless overproduction of a billion plastic, 'disposable' 'things' that kept millions employed without knowing or caring where it would all lead. And it was the time of the 'heap.' Nowhere, in any single object, is the noncommittal, directionless attitude of The Post War Era better expressed than in the fat, shapeless, chrome-plated pastry, the bulbous, bulky monster, which had become the American automobile. These hymns to clumsiness, the pathetic Nash-Ramblers and DeSotos that now sit like rusting mountains of awkward bathtubs in the junkyards of America, had become the ideals, the classics of the 'Heap Years.'"

Working on these features and at Topps should have been heaven for the past-obsessed artist but was actually a bit hellish—Gelman's magazine was never published, and Robert realized he could easily work interminable hours for pennies. "Before I still had a dream you could be a comic artist with some promise held out. But I didn't want a house in Scarsdale… Topps was the bottom." Things could only get better.

There were promising signs. In late autumn Robert and Dana moved downtown to the East Village to get closer to the countercultural center. They rented a modest apartment at Avenue A and East Eleventh Street in a small complex with an interior courtyard dubbed "Paradise Alley" by the various artists and poets who settled there in the 1920s. His Cleveland friends Liz Johnston and Buzzy Linhart weren't too far away on Mott Street, enjoying the first blush of Buzzy's folk music fame. Robert quickly discovered the very earliest issues of the *East Village Other*. It was, historian Abe Peck wrote, "the first underground paper to be more Groucho Marx than Karl." With its storefront office on Avenue A between Ninth and Tenth Streets, EVO became the chronicle of the not-yet-commodified counterculture, which at the time mashed together experiments in art, film, poetry, and music. The underground press had sprung to life the year before, when journalist Art Kunkin founded the *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1964, focusing on investigative political and cultural reporting, and for the first time, giving the Black population of the city a voice, especially after the 1965 Watts Uprising. Kunkin and many others felt that the national press was simply reporting what the government fed them, not investigating the local and federal governments' brutal attacks on civil rights leaders and hidden war in Vietnam. For many, even the decade-old *Village Voice* was too polite, too enamored with the Democratic establishment, and overall a bit square. The underground press sought to report on the harsh political and cultural realities of its young readership, in its own language.

With the *Los Angeles Free Press* as an inspiration, the *East Village Other* was founded in October 1965 by Walter Bowart, Allen Katzman, and Dan Rattiner. Aside from a distinctly wiseass New York sensibility, it was distinguished by its coverage of the culture flourishing in a ten-block radius of its ramshackle Avenue A storefront office, heated in the winter by a potbellied stove and open in the summer to Tompkins Square Park. They claimed Andy Warhol as their own and gave Timothy Leary plenty of coverage; the Fugs, which teamed poet Ed Sanders with performer Tuli Kupferberg and drummer Ken Weaver, were practically a house band. And as the *Voice* had Feiffer and mainstream papers had *Peanuts*, so the underground papers would have their own comic strips, too.

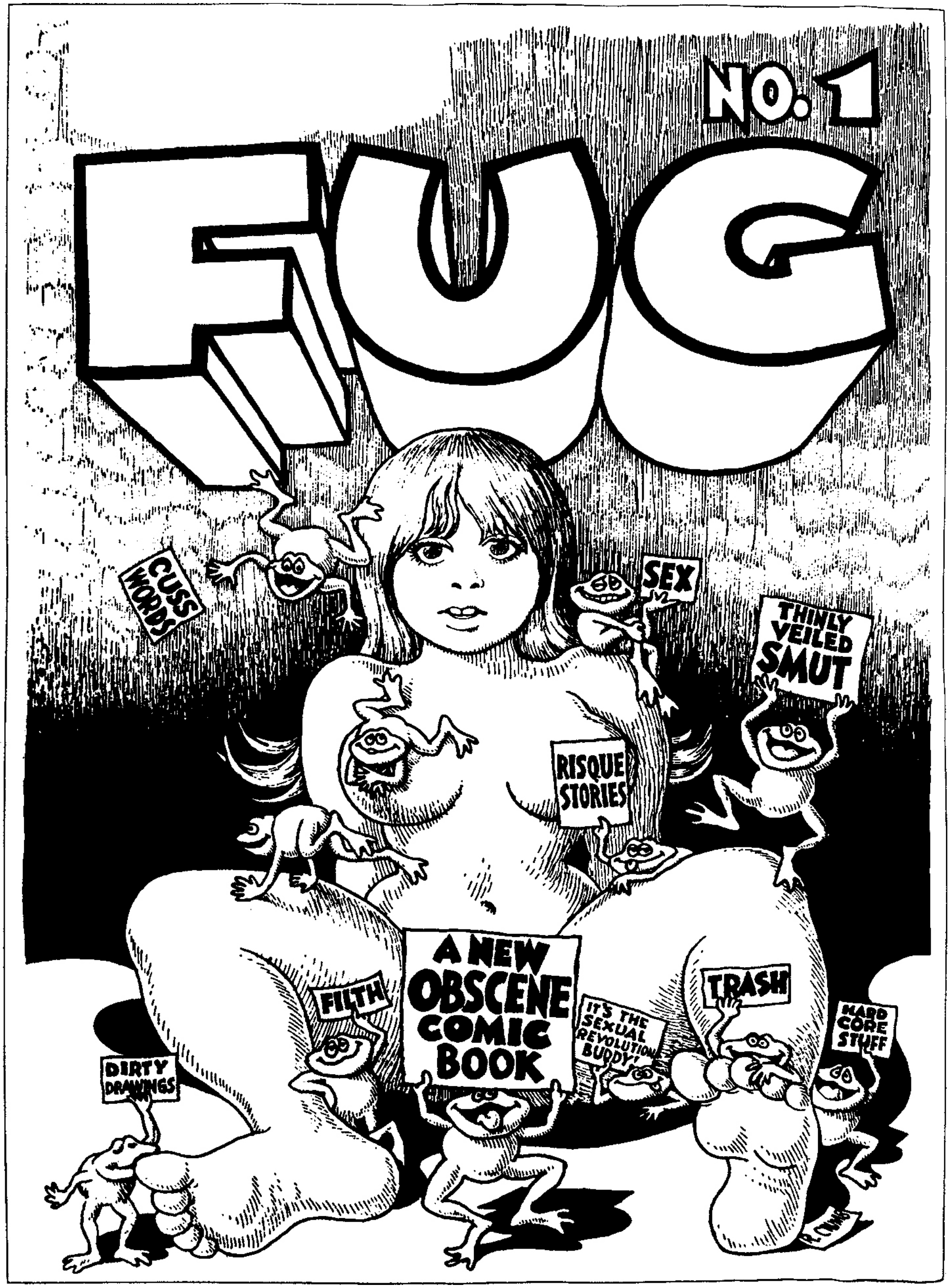
EVO's early lineup included *Gentle's Tripout*, by Nancy Kalish (using the nom de plume "Panzika"), which followed the woozy, Art Nouveau–enhanced psychedelic and psychological adventures of a female voyager. It was paired with *Captain High* by the paper's first art director, Bill Beckman, a University of Texas at Austin alumnus and, not coincidentally, a prolific pot dealer. In breezy, crudely drawn strips, Captain High wears a sweater marked "H" and floats through the city encountering hipsters, cops, and junkies. Beckman brought in his old Austin pal the *Texas Ranger* and *Help!* alum Gilbert Shelton, who, with two collaborators, contributed an occasional exquisite corpse–style strip called *Clank Honk!* in which each cartoonist drew a panel. Moving between mimeographed zines, poetry chapbooks, and now the newspaper, artist and poet Joe Brainard drew a few full-page comic strips. Where the college humor comics hewed closely to a satirical formula rooted in *Mad*, the work *EVO* published really did feel like something altogether new: comics that mirrored the experience of the turned-on youth. All of these strips used the panel-to-panel form of comics to hold drawings, but none of them used the historic language of comics—the telltale big feet, joke setups, and musical rhythms possible when invested in the form. Shelton and company's brief experiment excluded, these were artists dabbling in panels, not cartoonists steeped in the craft and committed to the potential of the medium itself. Still, they offered a signal that another way was possible.

"Captain High" was the first underground comic strip Robert saw. That fall, he and Dana were browsing around for other publications and frequenting the hip coffee shops in the East Village. In *Captain High* and the scrappy piles of other emerging underground papers, like the *Berkeley Barb*, and in the demimonde of New York City, Robert realized that there was a space for a different kind of cartooning, in both form and content. In his sketchbooks he began to develop ideas for a personal comic book that could pull from the popular languages of Topps and American Greetings but express his entire being in his own cartoon language rooted in the past and leading the way to the future.

Woody Gelman remembered, “Bob Crumb spoke to me of this desire to do an underground—he didn’t call it that, he just said he wanted to do dirty comics. His idea at the time was to have a comic called *Fug*, which was very, very daring… I guess even Bob at that time wouldn’t think of having the guts to call the thing *Fuck*, to come right out with it, which we do now. He showed [me a sketch of] this little magazine, and it had comments on it like dirty pictures, filthy stories, pornography, and things of that nature. This was his ambition; he talked of it many times. He wanted to do something that was just something he wanted to do.” Which is to say, a Rapidograph-drawn comic book that, in 1965, would be both well crafted and of his moment—a place where his Fritz the Cat stories could live comfortably next to sketchbook reports. Its youthful sophistication would have been unique for its time.

Fug no. 1, its name derived from Norman Mailer’s substitute for “fuck” in *The Naked and the Dead* (Robert wasn’t yet aware of the band the Fugs, which took its name from the same source), only existed as a sketchbook drawing of a comic book cover picturing frogs leaping around a doe-eyed naked woman, legs open, her nudity hidden by cover lines promising “A New Obscene Comic Book” and “Risque stories.” It was to include a ten-page Fritz the Cat story and “Where It’s At” (not coincidentally also the name of the event and exhibition listings in the back of *EVO*), a loose but well-observed three-page strip about one Muffy Zimmerman from Massapequa, Long Island, who had “gotten the word that there is someplace… that is what’s happening… that is where it’s at!” She sets out to find it, and, after tripping, love-making, listening, and meditating, she arrives at “that very east side loft… the place that is a living legend…”

It ends with Muffy’s smiling face filling a panel, ecstatic that she knows where it’s at.


NO. 1
FUG
CUSS WORDS
SEX
THINLY VEILED SMUT
RISQUE STORIES
A NEW OBSCENE COMIC BOOK
FILTH
IT'S THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION BUDDY!
TRASH
HARD CORE STUFF
DIRTY DRAWINGS
R. CRUMB

Sketchbook page, 1965.

Through Muffy, Robert poked at the tropes of the emerging counterculture as 1965 turned to 1966: the search for idols like Bob Dylan, the conformity of the “rebels,” and ironically, the desire to belong to the hippest of the hip no matter the cost. By the end of the strip, it’s clear that “where it’s at” is just another room filled with people asking if, indeed, they’re where it’s at. It’s an idea to which Robert would constantly return: The external *something* everyone is looking for is nothing at all. The hunt for the best, the coolest, the most beautiful scene is all an illusion. Clearer than his Fritz strips and signaling his simultaneous fascination with and disdain for his generation (and his audience), “Where It’s At” was a private declaration that he would not be swayed by the hype, that he would remain an observer, on the outside.

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CHAPTER 6

Chicago

While hanging together at an East Village café one chilly day at the end of 1965, Buzzy Linhart handed Robert a vial of LSD. A few hours later, back at his loft, Buzzy called Robert to tell him not to ingest the stuff—it was no good. Most definitely not pharmaceutical grade. Robert put it aside and by early February of 1966 he'd long since forgotten Buzzy's warning. Deciding to spend the winter night together at home, Robert took the bad batch and Dana gulped some of her own supply. Things did not go as planned.

In the grip of the powerful dose, suddenly Robert announced that he was leaving their eighteen-month-old marriage. Dana, herself in the throes of a heavy lysergic journey, was understandably angry at the notion of being a twenty-year-old divorcée. Unable to persuade Robert to reconsider, she locked herself in the bathroom and threatened suicide. Once he coaxed her out, she shoved him down on the couch, and, he claimed, "sat on [him] and told [him he] wasn't going anywhere." Robert talked his way out of this, too, and in the course of the conversation, Dana decided to go back to Cleveland. "So after letting me up she said, 'Let's have one last meal before I leave.'" Dana prepared a pot of leftover chicken soup. After one unusually bitter spoonful, Robert spit it out, demanding to know Dana's secret ingredient. He says that Dana immediately confessed to adding thirty sleeping pills to the recipe hoping he would sleep off the effects of the LSD and change his mind. Dana bluntly denied this story in her incomplete and unpublished memoir: "If I'd wanted him dead, he'd be dead!" Whatever happened that night, the next day

Dana packed her things; put their two cats, Stanley and Oliver, in a carrier; and flew to Cleveland and her parents' grudging embrace.

Two weeks later Robert wrote to Marty: "Dana left… We had this big fight… I got very disgusted and told her I absolutely didn't love her anymore… she left the next morning. I saw her off on the plane… she was very calm about it… sweet Danie… I love her still… I feel very empty and lonely without her… but I just can't live with the chick, man… I really can't… it became an unbearable burden… it was more depressing by the day… I couldn't even get horny there toward the end…This is a tragedy, though… it was such a beautiful thing… two children, clinging to each other, in refuge from a world that seemed too big for us… huddled together in our own warm world… a world so close and intimate you couldn't believe… but I don't want to be a child anymore. I want to conquer the world… I want to become master of myself… I want power… I want to rule! My whole way of thinking… LSD is helping to change all this… a good drug, that stuff… a courage which comes of understanding. I think that I'd be taking all of this much harder had it not been for LSD."

Though it cushioned the blow, Buzzy's LSD had left him somewhat debilitated: "For the next couple of months I felt like the guy in *Eraserhead*… everything was dreamlike and unreal. It was rather pleasant in a certain way except that I was helpless and barely able to cope." One morning in early March 1966, after staying up all night tripping on yet more LSD with another ex–Cleveland bohemian with whom Dana rightly suspected Robert was having an affair, "I went into the subway and saw an attractive young girl lying dead on the platform. A crowd had gathered. Police were there. I took this as an omen that I must leave New York." Robert called Liz and Buzzy. They were temporarily living in the Astor Hotel after a burst pipe had flooded their Mott Street loft, and in need of a cheaper place to crash. With the rent on Eleventh Street paid for March, Robert handed his apartment keys to Liz. She implored him not to go, telling him he still had opportunities in New York, that he'd only wind up back with Dana.

He left anyway, first boarding a Greyhound bus to Philadelphia to deposit some artwork and other items with his parents, and then taking another bus to Chicago, where Marty Pahls was waiting. Marty was living alone in a notoriously disheveled apartment in Lincoln Park, still talking about writing the great American novel, but mostly working for a shady employment agency that maintained offices, took in money, but offered no actual employment. He was paunchy and drinking too much. Sandra was on his mind but not yet in his bed. But he was looking after Robert. He knew something was off about his friend.

In a March 6 letter to Dana, Robert sounds contrite, sends mixed signals about his commitment, but seems determined: "I'm writing this on the bus... I've left New York, finally. Will be traveling around for a while. I don't plan to stay in any one place very long. Gotta do this, li'l cutie. I'll try to send you money. I've got to be ready to accept marriage to some extent, so that I can fully enjoy your love and cuteness without reservation, without frustration, without feeling that something has been missed." He arrived in Chicago a couple of days later.

Chicago in 1966 was still a city of industry—of slaughterhouses and steel mills, printing and publishing. It was, for Robert, "somehow the focal point of what was left of that midwestern blind enthusiasm for making it." Though he didn't know it, the counterculture was just beginning to pick up; a group of six young graduates of the Art Institute of Chicago opened an exuberant and raunchy cartoon-inflected art show, *Hairy Who?*, just two weeks before Robert's arrival. But it was also a viciously segregated city in the grip of Mayor Richard Daley's political machine.

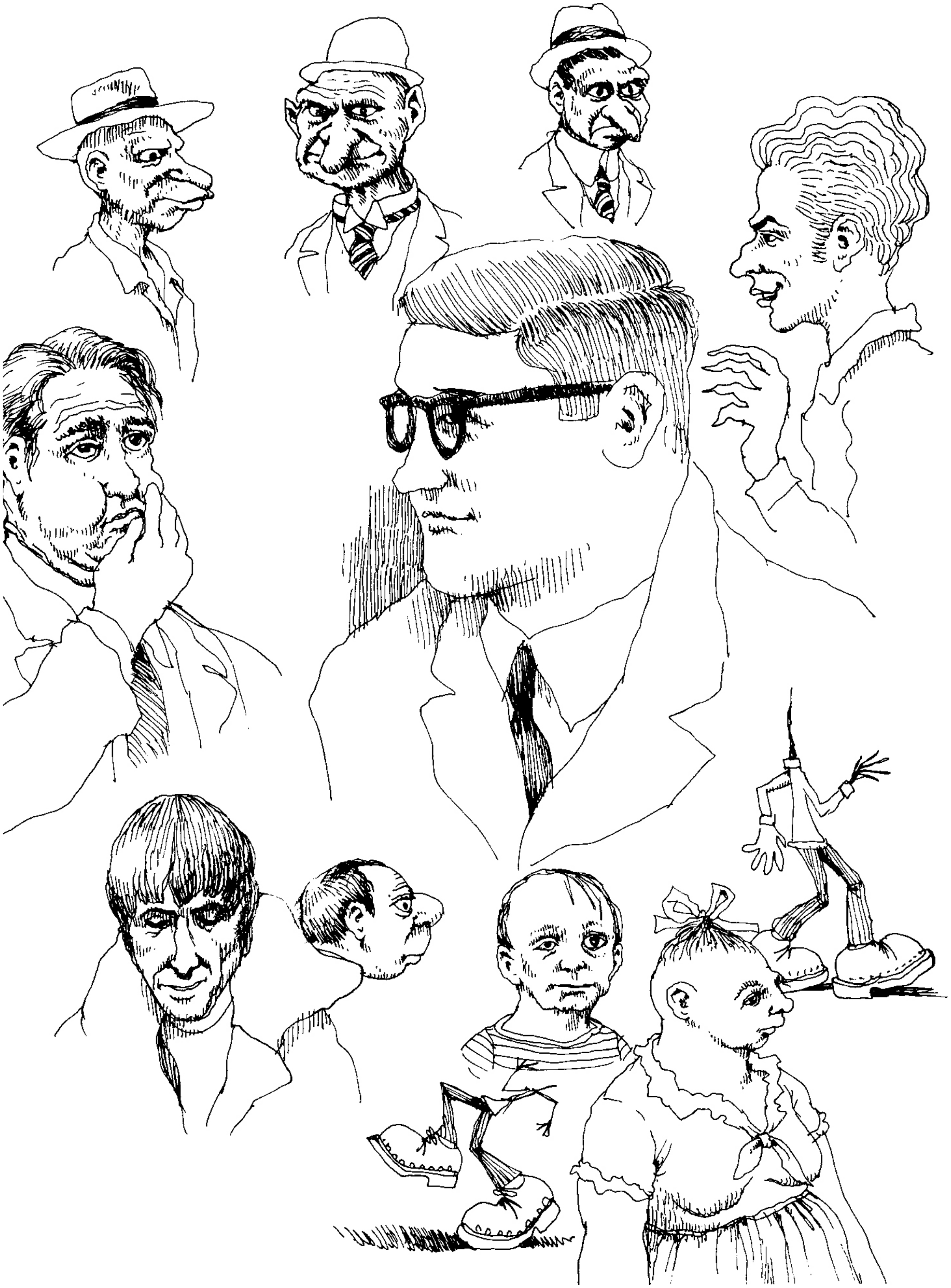
Robert's only hope for employment was *Playboy*, then still headquartered in the Windy City and one of the best-paying cartooning gigs in the country. Through Shel Silverstein and Harvey Kurtzman, associate cartoon editor Michelle Altman agreed to see Robert at her apartment in a downtown high-rise. Altman answered the door in a see-through negligee. Robert, nervous and intimidated by a woman who perhaps held the key to fame and fortune, launched into a Timothy Leary spiel about the powers of LSD to heal what ailed America. Altman was already hip to the drug and unimpressed. She was even less impressed by the bony, poorly dressed, Coke-bottle-thick-spectacle-wearing kid and his random ink drawings. She took his sketchbook for further inspection and dismissed him. The next communication he received from *Playboy* was a request to retrieve his artwork at its downtown office.

After a couple of days with no work in sight, Robert spent about five days alternately glued to Marty's couch and wandering the city. The psychic fog wouldn't quit: "The whole time I was in this fuzzy state of mind, the separation, the barrier betwixt the conscious and the subconscious was broken open somehow. A grotesque kaleidoscope, a tawdry carnival of disassociated images kept sputtering to the surface, especially if I was sitting and staring, which I often did. It was difficult to function in this condition."

Trying to get grounded in the world outside his mind, he walked the two miles back and forth from the Loop to the Chicago River. One day he rode the entire north–south route of the 22 Clark bus, recording the passing signs in gangly columns on a single sketchbook page: "Skully-Walton Oxygen & Sickroom Equipment," "Animal Dining Room," "Money," "Readings by Diana," "Live Bait in Rear," "Building Food Shop," "Hasty Tasty," and dozens more cascade around a rickety and surreal amalgam of water towers, row houses, heating ducts, and fire escapes. Weekends, like so many other artists and musicians in the city, Robert and Marty visited the vast Maxwell Street flea market, seeing "endless stalls of guys selling purple pants, rhythm and blues records, chitterlings, and snap brim hats.” At night they threw rejected 78 rpm records at the advancing rats. “Nothing good,” Marty would later remember with the deadpan alacrity of a true collector.

By the end of his first week in Chicago, the merry-go-round buzzing in his head was finally beginning to affect his drawing. He’d been resisting it, trying to wait it out while still drawing in his professional mode. The Robert Crumb we now know surfaced on March 15, 1966, on page 29 of his sketchbook: amid fairly realistic portraits of bus passengers is a strutting big-shoed character with a pin for a head. He is the first surfacing of the now-iconic “Keep On Truckin’” characters that would, just a few years later, bring Robert fame, money, and a mountain of legal trouble. But that day the image was still a private artistic breakthrough. Robert’s small reputation thus far was still based on cute, self-aware, and concise drawings that could sidle into the early-sixties upscale and unblemished visual worlds of *Esquire* magazine, Jules Feiffer, and Milton Glaser.

A pin for a head, nary a brain in sight, was exactly how Robert felt, and the “Pinhead” carnies were an ongoing fasciation of his American Greetings friend John Gibbons. The way Robert drew the character belonged to the banished prewar absurd-grotesque tradition of newspaper cartoonists Rube Goldberg and Bill Holman, whose scritchy-scratchy lines and balloon forms were anathema to contemporary graphics. These cartoonists, who drew big shoes and cracked sidewalks, straw hair and big noses, often worked in nonsense language with an unreasonably peppy pace, giving the comics the antic feel of a Marx Brothers film. This was middle- and working-class cartooning that aspired to enhance the daily lives of vast urban populations.



The squinky mode begins to seep into Robert's sketchbook, 1966.

For Robert, cartooning by Goldberg, Holman, and their cohort "reflected that world that those people lived in, that ordinary, everyday American world that was just in the background, in there in some deep way that the guys weren't even aware of." The fissure in his perception-ground through which the pinhead emerged opened up further possibilities. He kept drawing the rubbery grotesques, and the ultimate shift came from an encounter with a comic book lineage he'd left behind in his childhood.

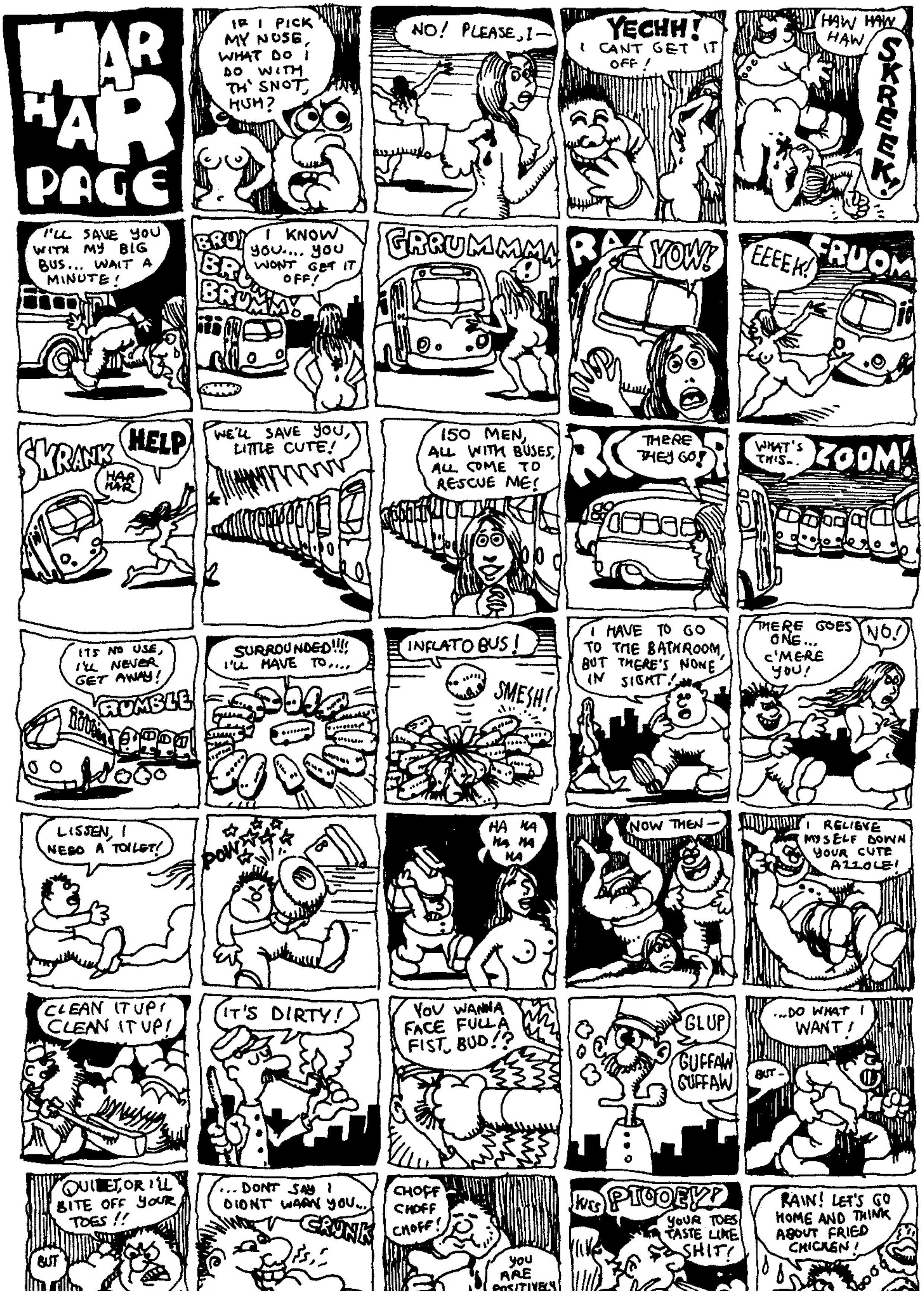
One day in late March, Marty brought Robert to a used magazine shop in a poverty-lacerated neighborhood in North Chicago. They walked down a long stretch of West Madison Street past soup kitchens, employment agencies, and abandoned storefronts, before reaching the store, its grimy windows piled high with old periodicals. In front, Robert witnessed a wisp of a man with a leashed chicken on his head playing an accordion. Every few beats the performer would drop the bird to the pavement and dance a jig around it. The long journey, and its capstone performance, seemed in keeping with what they found inside: stacks of grade-Z comic books from the 1940s with titles like *Krazy Komics, Barnyard Comics, Super Duck, Coo Coo, Ha Ha, Frisky Fables*. These were released by third-tier houses eager to get in on the World War II–era craze for both comic books and talking animal–driven animated features, and were floors below the ambitious, finely crafted structures of Carl Barks's Donald Duck comics for Disney. Rather than pay to license Mickey Mouse or Bugs Bunny, these publishers contracted with packaging companies to invent new funny creatures. In the July 1945 *Barnyard Comics*, for example, we find "Ham Swift Inventor," in which a pig named Ham pilots a magic vehicle, meets Hitler, and deposits him in the center of the Earth, and "Dip and Drip," about a wolf and a bear who visit New York, smoke cigars, go to jail, get tossed from a butcher shop, and are eventually run out of town. The drawing of these stories is as haphazard as their ideas: Because they were one-off characters, never intended for continuing features or the big screen, the looks of these cartoon protagonists changed from panel to panel; seemingly random background figures creep in; there's no structure to the buildings, rooms, and streets in which they live. Everything is rubbery and askew, reeking of two a.m. deadlines, cigarettes, and greasy hamburgers. They were working in a vernacular language so acceptable as to be almost invisible. Robert was struck by the smiling innocence in service to chaos, degradation, and unfunny sight gags.

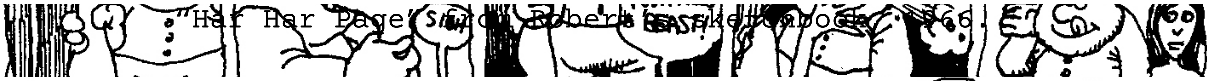
These stories and characters were simultaneously beguiling and familiar to Robert. They were mostly drawn by moonlighting animators supplementing their income from Warner Bros., Disney, MGM, and Columbia Pictures, writers and artists who worked on entertainment for millions of children—from *Pinocchio* to *Fantasia* to *Looney Tunes*. Topps's Woody Gelman was himself once among them. They were usually drawn in converted living rooms and cafeterias after work and on boozy Saturday afternoons. Marty bought a bagful of the comics for a nickel apiece. Robert was entranced and inspired. Once they returned home Robert stayed in Marty's apartment examining this new old world.

Robert couldn't unsee these animals blithely perpetrating chaos on an infinitely malleable world. The dramatic arcs and consistent characters of his own comics work, now seemed too earnest. "The visionary part of my mind was set on some kind of automatic level that was electronic and buzzy. If I was sitting on a bus or not doing something active it would immediately start to take over and I would just get lost in this weird cartoon vision of reality. It was very inspiring, and completely changed the subject matter of my drawing, over the course of about a week." Suddenly his work began to break down into stranger, grittier, nonlinear ideas and he began indexing characters as they emerged on the page rudderless but ready for deployment. He lost all interest in trying to reflect contemporary reality in the satirical mode of Fritz the Cat. He immediately began improvising comic strips directly in his sketchbook with his number-zero Rapidograph, which, because it doesn't allow for line variation, enabled him to focus solely on his interior vision, without concern for the look and feel of the marks he was making. It was as close as he had come to a direct transference from his hand to the page. Marty looked on, amused, fascinated by, and supportive of his friend's transformation.

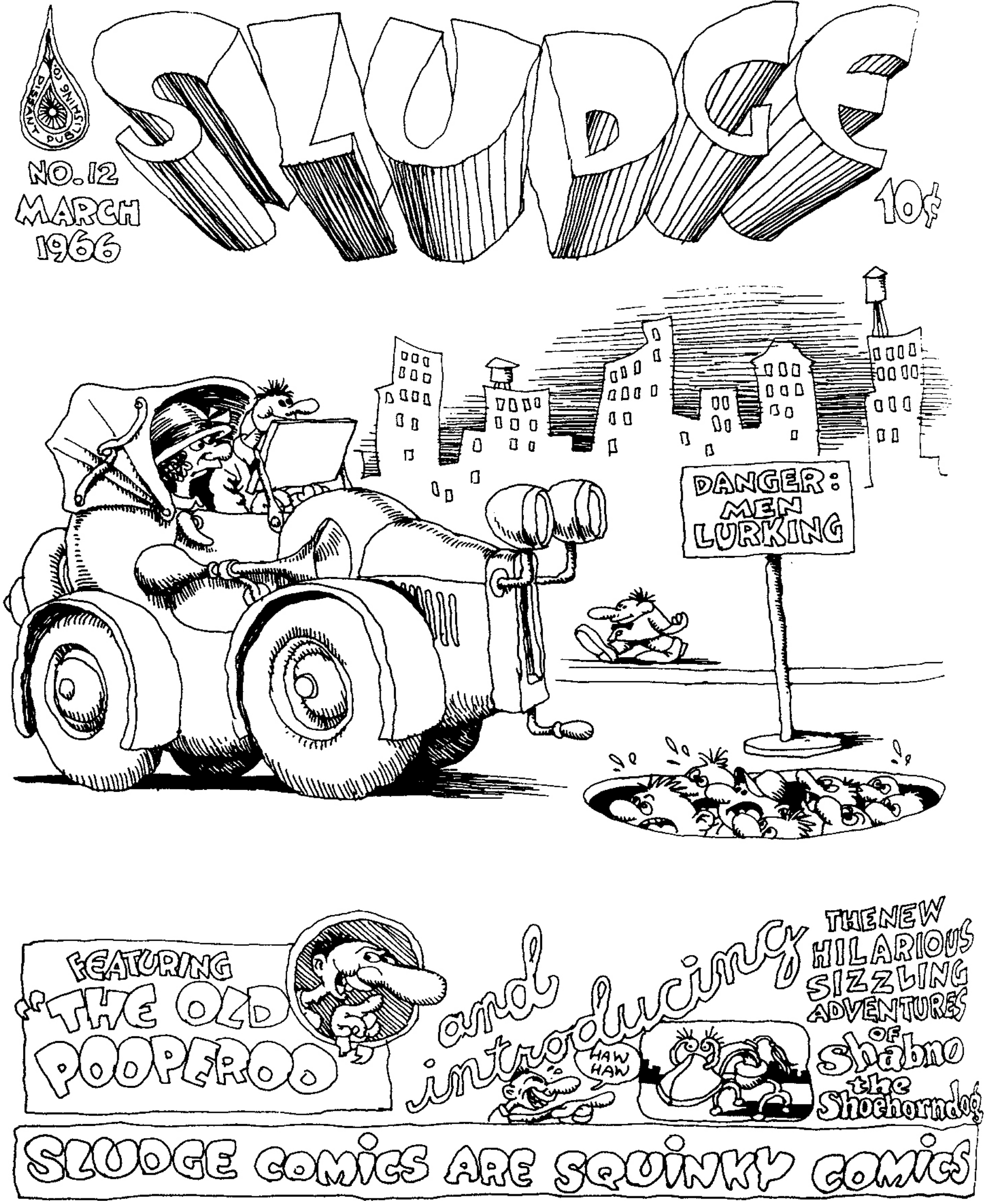
The first sketchbook comic strip in Robert's new mode is "Har Har Page," twenty-four tiny panels, one image leading to another through only visual associations. It begins with a rotund male wiping snot on a nude woman, then chasing her with a bus, which multiplies to infinite buses. He attempts to assault the woman, who in turn throws a toilet at him; he finally manages to capture her, only to be swept away by a janitor. Reappearing, the man drags the woman and eats her foot. In the end, she gives him a kiss, and, feeling some raindrops, the brute suggests that he and she "go home and think about fried chicken." It is misogynist, profane, surreal, and in bad taste, a channeling of American ugliness or perhaps the entire human condition. It is the first time Robert allowed sexual aggression into his work, with the implied adolescent reasoning that women prefer an aggressor (as opposed to a wallflower like the artist himself). "Har Har Page" is one part wish fulfillment, one part satire, and all a product of Robert's subconscious. It is the inadvertent prototype for everything that came after.

It was also a banishment of his traditional and linear Fritz the Cat comic strips, which first attracted Harvey Kurtzman, who, when he saw the new work later that year, thought Robert was either crazy or a failure, or both. Robert was decidedly not going to be the heir to *Mad* or anything else. Six pages after "Har Har Page" is a mock comic book cover—"Drek (March 1966, Still only 12¢)"—featuring a cylindrical barker character casting his giant oval eyes to the heavens, a terrifyingly cheerful visage of postwar optimism. Across from “Drek” is a concise drawing of a pigeon struck by an arrow, lying bleeding on the ground. Robert called it a symbol of both his broken marriage and his hard shift away from greeting card happiness. Drawing by drawing, he developed his new world in his sketchbook: Two pages after “Drek” is the comic strip “Eggs Ackley, the American Boy Egg Dealer,” which finds the titular character, based on Charles’s penchant for mischief, but hewing closely to Robert’s growing misogyny, lost in a cavernous city, hurling eggs at a legion of women until they overwhelm and smother him in a pile of bodies. Again, unhinged, laughing violence is met with affection. Thirteen pages after that (less than a week after “Har Har Page”) is a mock comic book cover for “Sludge No. 12” declaring: “Sludge Comics are Squinky Comics. Featuring The Old Pooperoo and introducing the hilarious sizzling adventures of “Shabno the shoehorn dog.” “Squinky” was a phrase Robert plucked from his fanzine past—cultural critic Gershon Legman coined the term “horror-squinky” in 1950 to refer to both funny animal and horror comics that, he felt, indoctrinated children and teens into violence under the cover of mythic storytelling and sublimated sex. Like *Seduction of the Innocent* author Dr. Fredric Wertham, Legman called for regulating the medium. “Squinky,” as with the content it embodied, became a term Robert embraced.


HAR HAR PAGE
IF I PICK MY NOSE, WHAT DO I DO WITH TH' SNOT, HUH?
NO! PLEASE, I—
YECHH! I CANT GET IT OFF!
HAW HAW HAW
SKREEK!
I'LL SAVE YOU WITH MY BIG BUS... WAIT A MINUTE!
BRUM BRUMM BRUMM!
I KNOW YOU.... YOU WONT GET IT OFF!
GRRUMMMM
!
RA
YOW!
EEEEK!
FRUOM
SKRANK
HELP
HAR HAR
WE'LL SAVE YOU, LITTLE CUTE!
150 MEN, ALL WITH BUSES, ALL COME TO RESCUE ME!
RO
THERE THEY GO!
R
WHAT'S THIS..
ZOOM!
ITS NO USE, I'LL NEVER GET AWAY!
RUMBLE
SURROUNDED!!!! I'LL HAVE TO,...
INFLATO BUS!
SMESH!
I HAVE TO GO TO THE BATHROOM, BUT THERE'S NONE IN SIGHT!
THERE GOES ONE... C'MERE YOU!
NO!
LISSEN, I NEED A TOILET!
POW
HA HA HA HA HA
NOW THEN—
I RELIEVE MYSELF DOWN YOUR CUTE AZZOLE!
CLEAN IT UP! CLEAN IT UP!
IT'S DIRTY!
YOU WANNA FACE FULLA FIST, BUD!?
GLUP
GUFFAW GUFFAW
...DO WHAT I WANT!
BUT—
QUIET, OR I'LL BITE OFF YOUR TOES!!
BUT
...DONT SAY I DIDNT WARN YOU...
CRUNK
CHOFF CHOFF CHOFF!
YOU ARE POSITIVELY
KISS
PTOOEY!
YOUR TOES TASTE LIKE SHIT!
RAIN! LET'S GO HOME AND THINK ABOUT FRIED CHICKEN!

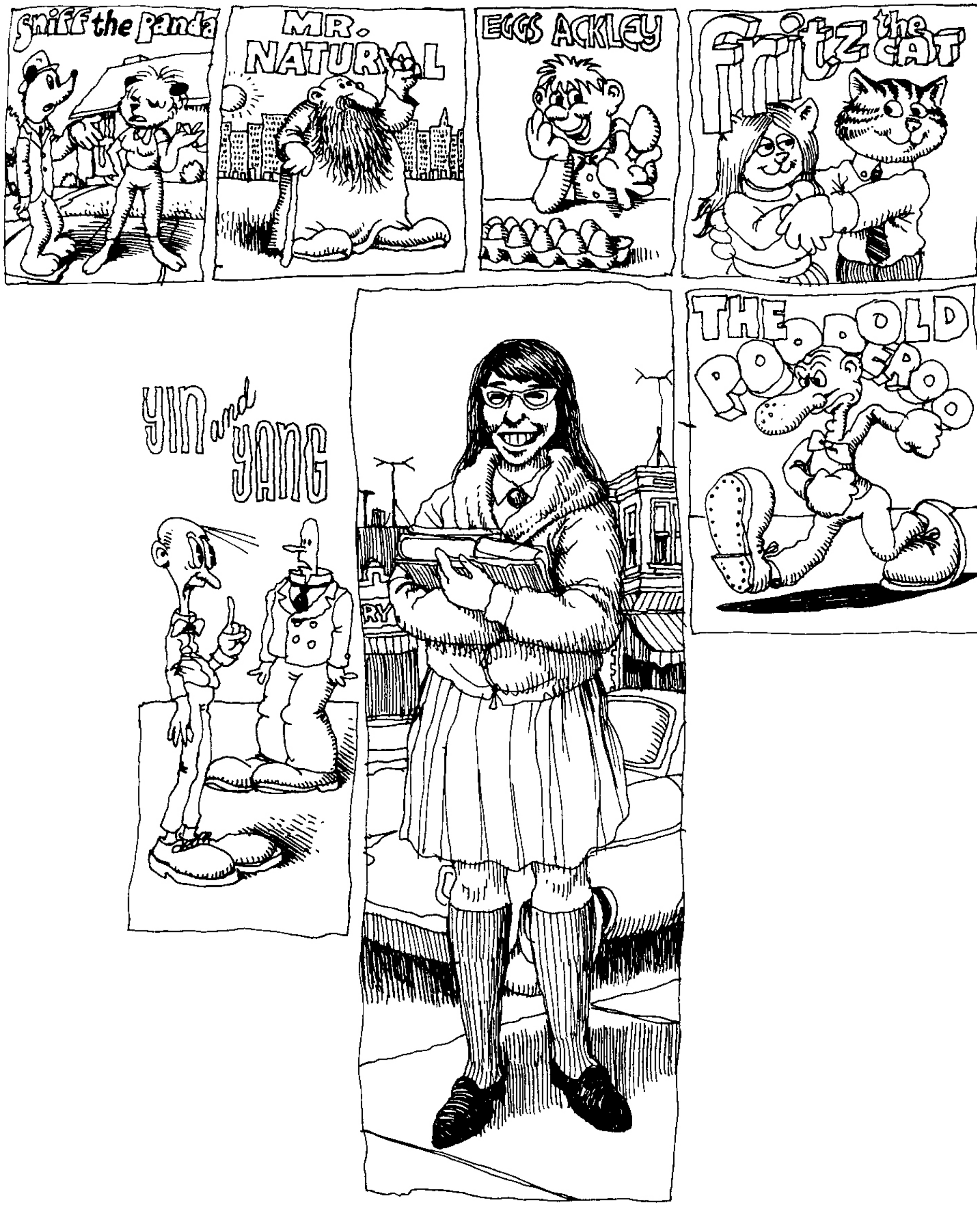


“Har Har Page,” from Robert's sketchbook, 1966.


SLUDGE
NO. 12
MARCH
1966
10¢
PUBLISHING CO.
DANGER: MEN LURKING
FEATURING
“THE OLD POOPEROO”
and introducing
HAW HAW
THE NEW HILARIOUS SIZZLING ADVENTURES OF Shabno the Shoehorndog
SLUDGE COMICS ARE SQUINKY COMICS

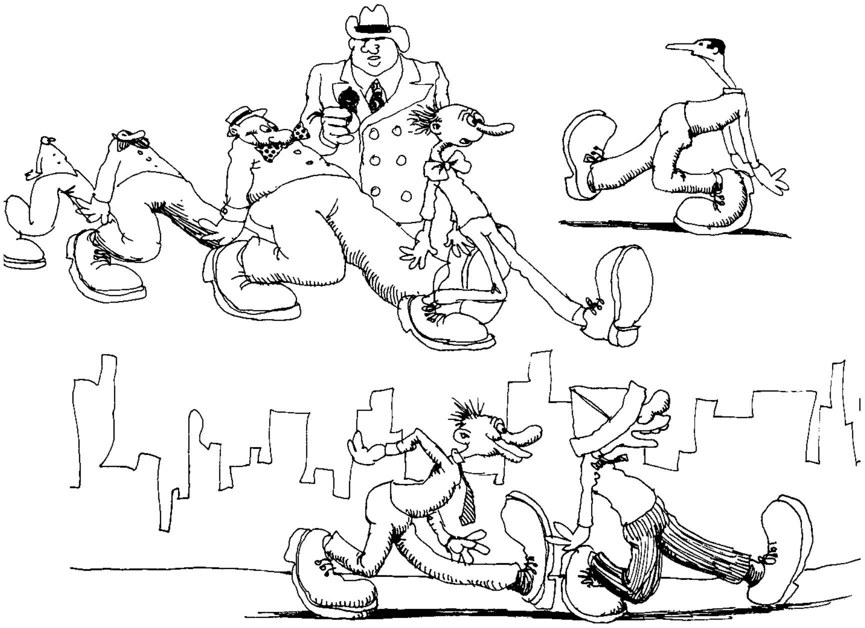
“Sludge,” sketchbook drawing, 1966.

Sixteen pages after “Sludge,” on a single page Crumb memorialized his cast of characters past and present, as if drawing a group portrait: Sniff the Panda, Mr. Natural, Eggs Ackley, Fritz the Cat, Yin and Yang, and the Old Pooperoo.


Sniff the Panda
MR. NATURAL
EGGS ACKLEY
Fritz the CAT
THE OLD POOPEROO
YIN and YANG
RY

Robert's rogues' gallery, 1966.

A few sheets later the Snoid and Flakey Foont joined, and sixteen pages after that, inspired by Marty's observation that the leaned-back, feet-out fellas he'd drawn were "truckin'" like the 1930s dance, Robert drew his first "Keep On Truckin'" sequence, four panels floating the words "HEY HEY HEY…" "KEEP ON TRUCKIN'…" "TRUCKIN' ON DOWN…" "… DOWN THE LINE," about characters doing just that. Names and appearances would change, but these beings would remain with Robert for the rest of his career. They were, Robert has said, "psychotic manifestations of some grimy part of America's collective unconscious." For him, this collective unconscious "was/is the product of a commercial, industrialized, capitalist society drenched in low-grade, dishonest popular entertainment populated with human stereotypes of all kinds."



The "Truckin'" characters enter the sketchbook, 1966.

By the end of March, just three weeks after his arrival in Chicago, Robert had summoned the language and discovered the vehicle for his long-simmering ideas about life, sex, race, and civilization.

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PART III

1966–1972

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CHAPTER 7

Underground Calling

Outside of his sketchbook revelations, Robert didn't know what to do next. By the end of March he was getting restless. Marty would go to work all day while Robert stayed in the apartment, listened to records, and drew. But he was running out of money and getting lonely. He began to miss Dana, or at least the idea of her. In early April, he announced his intention to come back to Cleveland after nearly two months apart, and she grudgingly took him back. Unlike Robert, she was actually enjoying her independence. She had her own apartment and a job at a hospital from which she pilfered handfuls of methedrine to sell to the college kids in the University Circle neighborhood. Thanks to the drug, Dana was newly slim, peppy, and suddenly much more popular—a good-looking young guy was courting her in Robert's absence and now resented her husband's sudden appearance. They moved into a different apartment in Cleveland Heights and sent out a hand-drawn invitation to a housewarming party. Next to a macro map of the city, including landmarks like Adele's, the art museum, and gags like a "house of prostitution" is the unsubtle ask: "A housewarming party at Crumb's new apartment! Wow! Everybody is supposed to hunt around their house and bring some piece of furniture or amusing conversation piece. There will be some booze, but not much, so some people will need to bring their own (also pot, hash, LSD, 'A' [amphetamines], and other stimulants)."

They did indeed manage to furnish the place; Robert went back to American Greetings, and Dana nursed him back to some semblance of coherence. At the end of April, they took one combination dose of LSD and methedrine, which gave Robert the unique feeling that the "top of [his] head was blown off," dispelling his visionary haze. The uncontrollable visions calmed down and took up residence in his subconscious. Now he could harness his sensibility again, and he kept working in his sketchbook, drawing covers for imagined comic books and further developing the designs and textures of his characters.

Back in the Hi-Brow offices he picked up the May 15, 1966, issue of the *East Village Other*, which, to his surprise, featured "Robt. Crumb's" rendering of a voluptuous Wrangler jeans model on the back cover. Arrayed around it is a selection of ads for like-minded underground newspapers. He'd left the drawing on Liz Johnston's coffee table back in New York, someone from *EVO* saw it there and asked if they could have it, and Liz obliged. That was all the permission the freewheeling publication needed. For the first time, Robert's artwork was used as a symbol of the counterculture—a literal model of the new world ahead. Robert, puzzled as to how the newspaper even had the artwork, shrugged it off and continued his life in Cleveland: days in the office churning out greeting cards, evening assignations, and gobbling LSD. Sometimes on Saturdays he and Dana would go make projects together at the office, goofing off with art supplies in the big Hi-Brow room. They also introduced marijuana into their diet, thanks to the very same friends from whom Dana lifted their very first acid. Robert enjoyed weed—it relaxed him in social situations and brought out his antic humor. He could giggle and joke now.

Dana's mother remained appalled by Robert but felt she should at least attempt to help him achieve some respectability, so she called in a favor from a friend who was a board member at an exhibition venue called Lakeview Center for the Arts and Sciences in Peoria, Illinois. They agreed to host a show of Robert's drawings the following spring, and he set to work on the project. On an exhibition schedule alongside palatable educational fare like *19th Century Painters* is Robert's *The American Scene*. His artist's statement, gilded with 1930s-style automobiles alongside it, reads in part: "My drawings are my personal attack on the absurd, sick, ridiculous world that we live in. I attempt to mildly shock you out of the euphoric life-process you are now being controlled by, and to pull you into my world so that I can take over your mind! But don't worry, it won't hurt, in fact you will, I hope, feel better when it's over. Love, Robert Crumb."

Across thirty-six drawings that fall of 1966, Robert let out his visions of the American Midwest in inky detail he wouldn't return to for decades. Priced between fifty and one hundred dollars each, the works are self-consciously "art," rendered on large sheets of paper with scale and finish to match: *Boobtoob, 1966* presents a young girl with her head smashed into a television screen; an untitled image shows middle-aged women smiling, their faces distended by the effort; and *The Flats* pictures the industrial area of Cleveland enveloped in smog, houses running into factories. The drawings harkened back to the social critique of artists eclipsed by modernism, like Reginald Marsh and Otto Dix. When the exhibition opened in the spring of 1967 it didn't generate any reviews, or, besides a single $25 sale, any money. At the reception, a middle-aged woman asked Robert, "Why do you hate us?" Speechless, he just giggled. It was a blip in a hazy time but one of the few occasions for which Robert ever produced artwork solely for exhibition.

* * *

That autumn, while Robert was preparing for his solo show, some friends returned from a trip to San Francisco. They carried a roll of the new psychedelic music and event posters festooned with swirling colors and letterforms. This wasn't the quick and dirty newsprint collage look of the underground newspapers—it was a thoroughgoing, hand-drawn aesthetic indebted to Art Nouveau graphics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Robert and Dana gawked at the graphics, their friends regaled them with tales of clouds of weed, cheap rent, and plentiful music. If the stories weren't alluring enough, the graphics were veritable travel posters beckoning the young all across the country: *Come west! It's groovy here!*

The posters really did begin as advertisements, albeit more local. In and around the Bay Area, events called "acid tests" were happening, in which free LSD was distributed to attendees, who could trip out to music provided by the city's up-and-coming bands, like the Grateful Dead, and dilate their pupils with the film and light-show projections. This gradually evolved into regular "dances" at old ballrooms around town—the Avalon was one, and the Fillmore another. It was a local scene, and the best way to get the word out was colorfully designed and printed posters. Woozy images were everywhere from telephone poles to groovy apartments to hip storefronts—these posters were often taken down and collected as quickly as they were put up, becoming the de facto art for the new counterculture. The prolific Wes Wilson was the first on the scene, adapting the lettering of early 1900s Vienna Secession posters and focusing on inking the negative space between the letters, and then wrapping, stacking, and shaping words to create a design that was barely legible to the uninitiated. Equally popular was the team of Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley—Mouse had helped invent the vernacular language of hot rods and car culture, while Kelly was a clever collagist, manipulating Edwardian and Victorian imagery that mirrored what the soon-to-be hippies were wearing.

Two of Robert's future collaborators were among what became known as the "Big Five" poster artists, signaling both the group's innovation and their stature: Rick Griffin and Victor Moscoso. Griffin, a laconic surfer from suburban Los Angeles, was also a young cartooning prodigy, producing cartoons for a Hermosa Beach surf shop at age sixteen and, by age twenty, inventing the squat, crosshatched icon “Murphy,” who made frequent appearances in *Surfer* magazine. Griffin got to smoking pot, fell in with a jug band, and began drawing posters. By 1967 he was settled in Haight-Ashbury and began lushly rendering complex spaces replete with occult symbols. His imagery defined the look of the Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix, and shifted psychedelic art away from Art Nouveau and Edwardian nostalgia and into densely imagined inner space. Griffin’s 1967 *Sunday Funnies* poster combined his interests in cartooning and psychedelia. It emulated the front page of the Sunday newspaper comic section. The band name “The Quicksilver Messenger Service” sits where a title might be and the panel sequence is one dimensionally rendered image after another, with no narrative. Victor Moscoso remembered seeing that poster and thinking: “It’s Walt Disney on acid. The balloons say nothing, or say ‘foreign’ languages that you can’t read.”

In Moscoso, with whom Griffin collaborated, he found an artist as aesthetically ambitious as he was. Moscoso, tall, wry, and always ready for an an argument, grew up in hardscrabble postwar Brooklyn, was a star at Cooper Union, and did a master’s degree at Yale under Josef Albers. Inspired by Wes Wilson’s use of the Secession-style lettering, he took up posters in 1966 and set out to invert everything he learned from Albers. Colors would be discordant, not harmonious; lettering would be stunning but illegible. He could draw immaculate psychedelic bouquets as easily as he could manipulate a photograph. He was also, like Griffin, a comic book fan.

Robert, meanwhile, was stuck in Cleveland, unable to make sense out of his thoroughgoing career in greeting cards. He had glimpsed another future in New York, but the city was too hard a place for him. Now these posters seemed to offer still another format for exploration, and it was clear to him that those artists had also taken LSD. By the end of 1966, he later said, “Looking at the hustle and bustle through psychedelicized eyes it all seemed like a complete sham, a petty scramble for position and prestige. My vision of life had become biblical, epic… and I was speechless, dumbfounded by this… this nonsense!” Everything was both wide open and absurd.

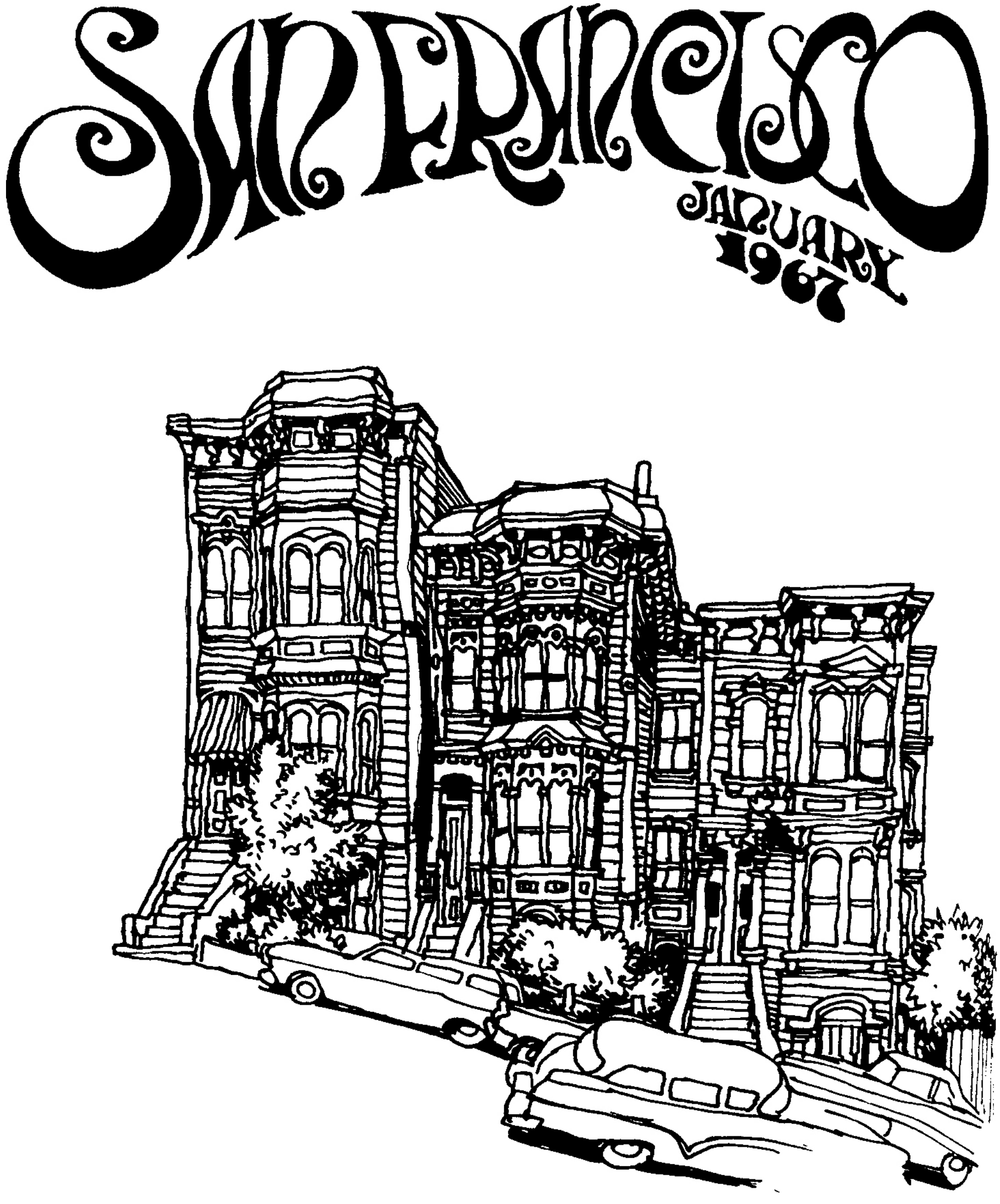
On a cold night in January 1967 Robert was nursing an after-work Coca-Cola at Adele’s contemplating his fate. He spotted Tim Dotson, an acquaintance from the Apt. 4 era three years earlier. Tim and his friend Skip Kenny had stopped at Adele’s for a bit of liquid courage before beginning their pilgrimage to San Francisco. They were hoping to arrive in time for an enormous gathering of hippies on January 14. Did Robert want to join them? Of course. He had his sketchbook, his wallet, and his coat with him. Rather than risk a blowup with Dana, he asked another friend at the bar to call her with the news that he’d split town (again) and off he went in Skip’s old Fiat, inching across the winter landscape at thirty-five miles an hour. Robert never did learn how to drive; his undiagnosed dyslexia made it impossible. Plus, he enjoyed the existential state of being the “eternal passenger.” It was a long, cold trip straight through to California.

The trio arrived just in time to attend the Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park on January 14. It was advertised as the “gathering of the tribes,” the first large-scale event of the hippie moment, featuring appearances by Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey (who parachuted out of a helicopter), Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and other high priests of the hip. Rick Griffin drew the poster, and twenty thousand people listened, swayed, and blissed out with the realization that they were among the new vanguard moving into hitherto unknowable possibilities.

The national nightly news coverage brought the hippies into suburban living rooms across the country, beckoning all alienated youth to go west, where they, too, could join this new utopia. Robert found the event thoroughly alienating. "I always seemed to remain an outsider observer of these barefoot wood nymphs… guess I wasn't beautiful enough… I mean, in my soul… dark demons lurked in there, the hippies could tell. They picked up on your vibrations…" The event marked the moment when LSD began to transform the left-wing antiwar and civil rights movements into something largely apolitical. LSD offered something "deeper" than rebelling against the political system—a personal and collective transformation rather than constant struggle, with the added bonus of new "parent" figures and heroes like Leary to offer guidance along the way. And for a while it was sweet and awfully fun, at least for the middle-class white kids who could afford it.

Robert and his companions crashed with a friend of Skip's in North Beach, who, three days in, was not pleased when he came home after work to find the three of them still hanging around his small apartment. He suggested they check out a neighborhood called Haight-Ashbury, which had overtaken North Beach as the place to be for the young and hip. Robert, never one to wear out his welcome, wandered out in search of a different floor to sleep on. He had "no idea what [he] was going to do or where [he] was going to stay, and maybe two or three dollars left to [his] name." San Francisco was wondrous to him: still intact, beautiful, serene. The ornate cornices and cupolas of the old wooden Victorian houses were ideal for his Rapidograph, and everyone was just floating. He found his way to Haight-Ashbury, passing barefooted seekers wearing paisley, preachers offering salvation, drug dealers offering lids and acid, and drummers on a corner until finally arriving at the Psychedelic Shop, which had opened less than a year earlier.

With posters plastered around the windows and records, publications, and clothing of the nascent counterculture for sale, it was an emporium, a shelter, and a central exchange, with one wall covered in bits of paper with messages or phone numbers. Robert joined the other scruffy kids sitting on the floor along one wall. An hour or two passed—he drew a distressed-looking pig in an overcoat in his sketchbook—until he heard a gentle voice asking, “Robert? Is that you?” It was yet another old Cleveland friend, Jeff Kessler. He helped Robert to his feet and said he could stay at his two-story group house, with dark blue Czechoslovakian glass mounted into the bay windows, perched in the Outer Sunset. Kessler, a good-looking, naturally gregarious stoner, was a performer who also earned some money making stained glass. He and his roommates attended the nearby Christian Yoga Church led by Father Subramuniya. Robert went to a few services and painted elaborate signs and banners for the sect. He remembered, “Subramuniya was a tall, distinguished looking Anglo-American with a shock of thick white hair worn like a lion’s mane, swept back from his forehead—a striking figure.” But, as he had at the Be-In, he observed a leader’s body language and rap, stored it away for a future comic, and backed away. Robert was quietly recording the whole scene, often sitting on the floor in the house cross-legged, back to the room, drawing. He was also, once again, working long-distance for Hi-Brow. Ralph Shaffer and Tom Wilson were losing patience with Robert’s antics—he’d left unfinished work on his drawing table and also failed to tell them he was going freelance again—but he was too talented to let go.


SAN FRANCISCO
JANUARY
1967

Robert's impression of San Francisco, from his sketchbook, 1967.

Once again, he missed Dana: "I would leave her and then miss her and write letters to her about how much I still loved her, and she would forgive me and take me back, repeatedly, over and over. I really jerked her around in this way. I didn't have the fortitude to stick to my guns and let her go on and start a new life. I was emotionally weak, lost, 'confused,' as she characterized my mental state." As soon as he got a few checks from American Greetings, he sent for her. Dana, in turn, asked Maxon Crumb, still a mechanic in Philadelphia, to fly to Cleveland and then drive with her to San Francisco in her 1948 blue Silver Streak Pontiac.

After a brief stay in the Outer Sunset house and then an apartment on Sacramento Street, in March 1967, Dana and Robert settled into a two-bedroom flat in an old brick Victorian at 1555 Oak Street, just a few blocks up from the intersection of Haight and Ashbury Streets. At $70 a month, the apartment had hardwood floors and a spacious living room with a big bay window that opened out on the Panhandle park, where free concerts were held most weekends; the sounds of Janis Joplin singing with her band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, wafted into their living room. Dana got a job teaching arts and crafts at the Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers, and Robert attempted to get poster gigs to no avail.

At a table in their bedroom, Robert drew comics and, inspired by LSD, began painting old cathedral radios in bright psychedelic colors, which he gave away to friends. He also painted signs for various people and small businesses. He was uncharacteristically caught up in the idealist optimism of the burgeoning hippie culture. Robert and thousands of other young people were convinced that if the whole world took LSD, everything would be okay. Friends from Cleveland, Joel and Jane Deutsch, came to stay in their windowless second bedroom for several months. Joel, a poet, could quote lines from Robert's sketchbook and encouraged Robert to turn out comic strips in his new, cosmic mode. Unlike back east, people seemed to just stop by all the time. Old friends like the Deutsches, new ones from the sidewalk—it was almost too liberated. But connections were made. Even the FBI came for a visit one day, ostensibly looking for runaways but also checking out the Crumbs' pitiful marijuana stash —just some seeds and stems in a shoebox. An agent quizzically looked at Dana and pronounced, "Boy do you have a shitty stash."

That spring, work trickled in from sources both mainstream and countercultural. American Greetings sent assignments and published a whimsical little novelty book written by John Gibbons and illustrated by Robert called *The Sad Book*, but most important, Harvey Kurtzman had recommended Robert to Mike Thaler, another savvy cartoonist and editor both tuned in to the history of the medium and on the watch for promising young talent. Thaler had assembled a couple of smart comics anthologies over the years and was then the cartoon editor at a New York–based *Playboy* knockoff called *Cavalier* that published hip young writers and cartoonists alongside centerfolds. Thaler offered Robert $125 per published page —a king's ransom for him and Dana.

In the late spring of 1967 Robert sent along his four-page masterpiece "Stoned," which ran alongside a report from the Monterey Pop Festival in the October 1967 issue of *Cavalier*. "Stoned" was Robert's first published work in his post-Chicago mode; it introduces a form Robert returned to for decades: a nonlinear sequence of panels, each a clear, funny, and instantly legible image and caption, that build to a climax. He summoned up every American icon he could think of and arranged them as though to a rhythmic beat. There's "Through the Looking Glass Stoned" (a grand dame smushes her face into a mirror), "Gonna fry in hell stoned" (a devil pontificating), "Street of Laredo stoned" (a classic old-west cowboy on Main Street), "Shooting up junk stoned" (a beatnik with a giant needle in his arm), "Just like bein' born stoned" (a baby bird emerging from an egg), "Nuclear Holocaust stoned" (a bomb falling on a city), and a final half-page panel, "Macro-Cosmic Ever-Flowing

Love-Lite WOW Stoned," blowing all the accumulated characters out of the frame.

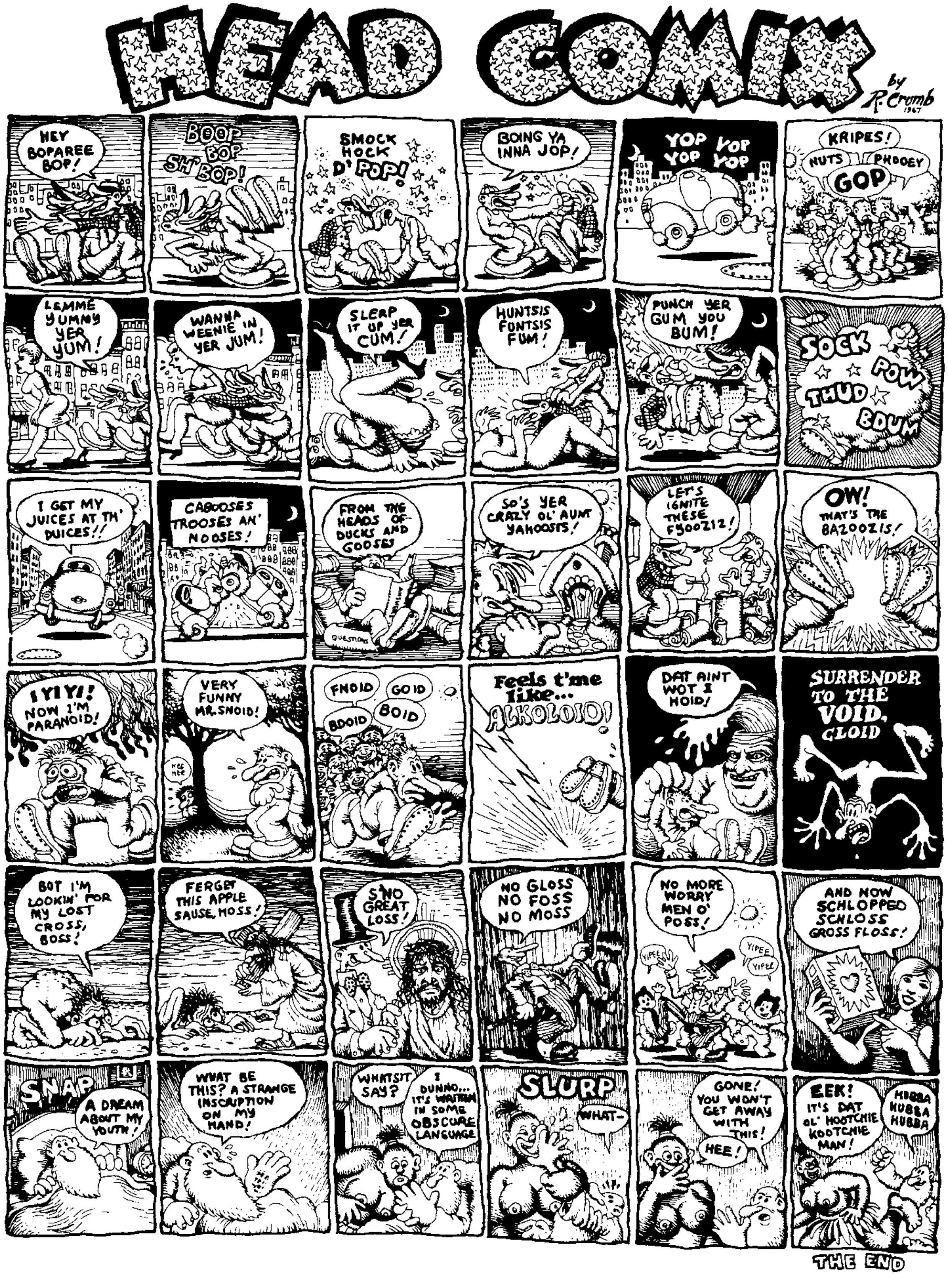
Shortly after he shipped "Stoned" to *Cavalier*, Robert was at one of the many house parties in the Haight, the gurgling of water pipes mingling with the sounds of the Rolling Stones record *Between the Buttons*. A mutual friend introduced him to a former art student from Philadelphia named Brian Zahn. A dreamy guy from a cultured Jewish family, Zahn was in San Francisco getting high, checking out the scene, meeting like-minded heads, and plotting his own underground paper named after the I Ching divining sticks: *Yarrowstalks*. By then, underground papers were sprouting up in every city—some emphasizing journalism, others local culture, and others, like Zahn's, visually driven projects loosely based on the trend-setting *San Francisco Oracle*—a tabloid overflowing with intricate artwork, patterns, and new-age messages. Zahn perused Robert's ever-present sketchbook and immediately asked if he'd contribute work to *Yarrowstalks*. Robert, eager to find his own way into any print venues that would take him as they found him, with or without pay, obliged by carefully removing a couple of pages from his sketchbook and handing them to his new publisher.

In June, Zahn released the first issue in a relatively small run of ten thousand copies distributed to both coasts. Nestled amid the usual long-winded texts on meditation and music, poetry, an interview with Timothy Leary, and advertisements for head shops, food co-ops, and other emporiums, are Robert's first comics published in the underground press. "Mr. Natural—The Zen Master" is a six-panel iteration of Mr. Natural, a bald wannabe guru with a long beard, big shoes, and a giant shirt. He has antecedents throughout comics history, any one of which Robert could have seen: a nonsensical hitchhiker who appeared for over a decade in the 1930s and '40s in marijuana enthusiast Gene Ahern's comic strip *The Squirrel Cage*, and Geezil from E. C. Segar's *Popeye*. Like all of

Crumb's characters, he's both a part of and a departure from the past. Much like 1966's "Where It's At," Robert bluntly punches at both the urge for answers and the need for gurus. A guy asks, "What's the answer," and the response from Mr. Natural is: "What's the Question?" This continues for five panels until, finally, Mr. Natural says, "Go Fuck yourself."

Zahn published a second issue of *Yarrowstalks* in June, this one containing Robert's "Head Comix/Hey Boparee Bop!," a thirty-six-panel strip covering an entire tabloid-sized page, propelling the reader forward to the staccato beat of the early bebop records by Charlie Parker he'd heard back at Harvey Pekar's Cleveland apartment. Each row of panels has its own rhythmic scheme, leading to the action of the next row: characters grab a woman, smack each other, explode; cars collide; Jesus is found, then lost; a showman parades and sings; and in the final row, Mr. Natural awakens (in a callback to *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, in which every adventure ends with Nemo awakening) and finds an inscription on his hand, and Angelfood McSpade, Robert's racist fantasy of a large, muscular, and naive Black woman seemingly made of inflated rubber, licks it off. There was no plot, no backstory, no real gags, and yet it was funny and self-aware—captions winking at the audience as though exclaiming, "It's just a comic, folks!" And it was, while also employing highly charged religious and racial stereotype imagery. Though rambunctious nonsense comic strips date back to the early twentieth century, those antecedents were based on limericks or other structures. "Head Comix/Hey Boparee Bop!" is purely associative, one image suggesting the next, like a one-man exquisite corpse. It also allows, as only George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* had before, for multiple readings—as a reflection of the chaotic urban moment, as the exhibitionist id of the baby boomers, or as the addled brain of the first generation to be immersed in the language of commodified popular culture since birth. Until Robert decided otherwise, the comics medium was part of the establishment commercial culture and a container for many things, but rarely (once again, *Krazy Kat* being the exception) anything so broadly transgressive, multilayered, and deeply personal. He dragged the medium into adulthood.

Robert's comics in both *Cavalier* and *Yarrowstalks* flowed right into the Summer of Love, during which over a hundred thousand seekers, hucksters, and hopefuls flooded into San Francisco looking variously for easy sex, copious cheap drugs, or spiritual enlightenment. The moment had been building since the early 1960s and now it was mainstream. The once-obscure mimeograph poet and Fugs member Ed Sanders gazed soulfully from the cover of *Life* magazine in February 1967, landing on the coffee tables of over seven million American households; Scott McKenzie's hit single "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" promised a loving new movement; and by June even the moderately conservative *Time* rolled out two million copies of its June 7 cover story, "The Hippies: Philosophy of a Subculture."


HEAD COMIX
by R. Crumb 1967
HEY BOPAREE BOP!
BOOP BOP SH'BOP!
SMOCK HOCK D' POP!
BOING YA INNA JOP!
YOP YOP YOP YOP
KRIPES!
NUTS
PHOOEY
GOP
LEMME YUMMY YER YUM!
WANNA WEENIE IN YER JUM!
SLERP IT UP YER CUM!
HUNTSIS FONTSIS FUM!
PUNCH YER GUM YOU BUM!
SOCK POW THUD BDUM
I GET MY JUICES AT TH' DUICES!!
CABOOSES TROOSES AN' NOOSES!
FROM THE HEADS OF DUCKS AND GOOSES
QUESTIONS
SO'S YER CRAZY OL' AUNT YAHOOSIS!
LET'S IGNITE THESE FJOOZIZ!
OW! THAT'S THE BAZOOZIS!
I YI YI! NOW I'M PARANOID!
HEE HEE
VERY FUNNY MR. SNOID!
FNOID
GOID
BDOID
BOID
Feels t'me like... ALKOLOID!
DAT AINT WOT I HOID!
SURRENDER TO THE VOID, CLOID
BOT I'M LOOKIN' FOR MY LOST CROSS, BOSS!
FERGET THIS APPLE SAUSE, MOSS!
S'NO GREAT LOSS!
NO GLOSS NO FOSS NO MOSS
NO MORE WORRY MEN O' POSS!
YIPEE
YIPEE
YIPEE
AND NOW SCHLOPPED SCHLOSS GROSS FLOSS!
SNAP
A DREAM ABOUT MY YOUTH!
WHAT BE THIS? A STRANGE INSCRIPTION ON MY HAND!
WHATSIT SAY?
I DUNNO... IT'S WRITTEN IN SOME OBSCURE LANGUAGE
SLURP
WHAT-
GONE! YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH THIS!
HEE!
EEK! IT'S DAT OL' HOOTCHIE KOOTCHIE MAN!
HUBBA HUBBA HUBBA
THE END

"Head Comix," *Yarrowstalks* no. 2, 1967.

All summer long, Zahn heard from his cohort that Robert's comics were the best part of his newspaper, so in August he offered him the entire eight-page *Yarrowstalks* no. 3. The cartoonist obliged with five new pages of comics and a glorious cover featuring innocents running toward each other, an enormous lightbulb with a heart inside illuminating the artifacts of America's self-image: a tank, a hamburger, a radio, a chair, a motorcycle, a baby, flowers, a pony, money, coffee, a hammer, a pinwheel. On television, in the supermarket, on the boulevards, Robert's generation had grown up with both the new postwar aspirational culture and the Depression-era world of their parents. The racism and, later, sexism they protested was woven seamlessly into those cultures—from Aunt Jemima syrup bottles to the Black butler Rochester on the enormously popular Jack Benny television show. Robert emerged from a household that was casually racist, without the self-consciousness or sense of history that it took to move beyond the mores of the times. Many people moved forward into protest, consigning the recent past to a pre-enlightened time, but Robert instead examined the toxic detritus with stoned fascination. He turned it over and over in his mind, this denigration of nonwhite, non-Christian peoples, the violence zigzagging through the culture, and the alienation inevitable under such conditions. It was in the comics he found in Chicago, in the 78s he so loved, and in the family from which he'd escaped.

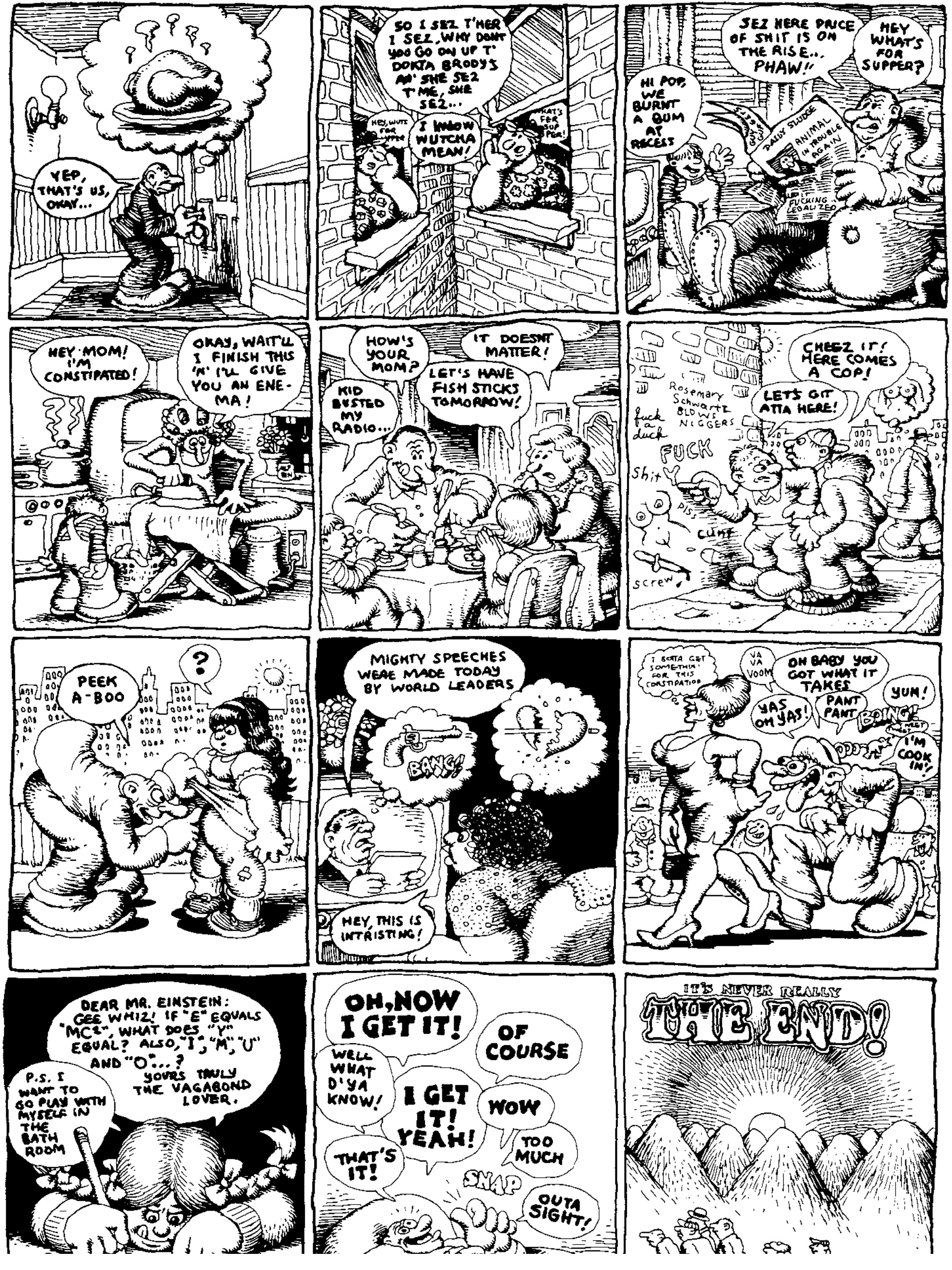
The highlight of *Yarrowstalks* no. 3 is its final strip, "Life Among the Constipated," each of its eleven panels depicting a scene of futility or absurdity in America: the living room, the kitchen, a sex-crazed madman following a high-heeled woman who worries, as Bea always did, about her children's constipation; a little girl writing to Albert Einstein about physics and "playing with [her]self in the bathroom"; a nuclear family around the dinner table, each in a different conversation. The final panel, captioned "It's Never Really the End," encapsulated a fundamentally middle-class world in which everyone is thinking about something different. Life was one big disconnection. This message cut right into the brains of the youth. At last, a comic made for them, that spoke to their profound experience of existing in a new, potentiated world. Robert hit hard because the message and its vessel were of, not outside of, the culture. But he resolutely maintained his independence.

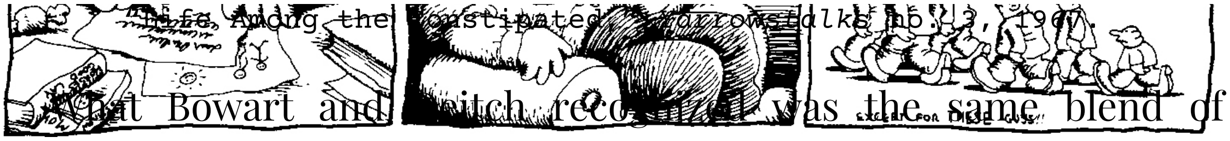
Five thousand copies of *Yarrowstalks* no. 3 were printed and distributed to cities across the country: Chicago, Providence, Los Angeles, San Francisco (five hundred copies went to Robert in lieu of cash payment; he gave them to friends and sold them wholesale to shops), and internationally, at least to London. But this effort, and *Yarrowstalks* itself, would be a local footnote if not for the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS), a loose international confederation of underground newspapers that exchanged free subscriptions and allowed one another to reprint any material in its member publications. This meant that Robert's *Yarrowstalks* work could, and did, appear in other underground newspapers around the world. This was the new economy of exchange. In this utopian scheme, no one was paid for the material, let alone notified of its publication, but for the first time underground—bohemian—culture was linked together around the globe, creating an audience far wider than Robert, or any other artist, could imagine.

The *East Village Other* picked up "Life Among the Constipated" via the UPS for its October 1–15, 1967, issue. Its circulation was around sixty thousand copies, suddenly putting Robert in the hands of an exponentially larger audience. Underground newspapers had been picking up more and more comics throughout the year. Until the emergence of these publications, cartoonists either shared partial ownership of their creations or gave up their rights entirely, and had to abide by either the Comics Code or the standards of a regular newspaper syndicate. But now, if they were willing to live with little money and no guarantees, young cartoonists could own their work and draw whatever they wanted for a like-minded audience. One of the newcomers was Kim Deitch, son of innovative animator and illustrator Gene Deitch. Tall, broad-shouldered, and perpetually wide-eyed, he had dropped out of art school, worked as a merchant marine and an orderly in a mental hospital, and begun drawing for *EVO* at the end of 1966. He dealt weed for art director/*Captain High* cartoonist Bill Beckman and was learning the craft drawing his surreal hippie strip *Sunshine Girl*. In late September of 1967, Deitch dropped by the offices to try to sway publisher Walter Bowart to give his strip more space. He recalled, "When I finished my spiel [Bowart] said, 'Draw me some strips like this and I'll give you a whole page!' I looked to where his hand was pointed and to my great surprise we were standing in front of a full-page Crumb comic strip, one that I had just seen in *Yarrowstalks*, hanging up and ready to go into the next issue. Bowart raved on about at last having found the perfect acid-head cartoonist, but I scarcely heard him. I was stunned." So stunned that he withdrew from comics for a little while so he could get his bearings.

LIFE AMONG THE CONSTIPATED

BY R. CRUMB


YEP, THAT'S US, OKAY...
SO I SEZ T'HER I SEZ, WHY DONT YOU GO ON UP T' DOKTA BRODY'S AN' SHE SEZ T'ME, SHE SEZ...
HEY, WUT'S FOR SUPPER
I KNOW WUTCHA MEAN!
WHAT'S FOR SUP PER!
SEZ HERE PRICE OF SHIT IS ON THE RISE.. PHAW!!
HEY WHAT'S FOR SUPPER?
HI POP, WE BURNT A BUM AT RECESS
DAILY SLUDGE
ANIMAL IN TROUBLE AGAIN
FUCKING LEGALIZED
GUY'S GUTS
HEY MOM! I'M CONSTIPATED!
OKAY, WAIT'LL I FINISH THIS 'N' I'LL GIVE YOU AN ENE-MA!
HOW'S YOUR MOM?
IT DOESNT MATTER!
LET'S HAVE FISH STICKS TOMORROW!
KID BUSTED MY RADIO...
CHEEZ IT! HERE COMES A COP!
LET'S GIT ATTA HERE!
Rosemary Schwartz BLOWS NIGGERS
fuck a duck
FUCK
Shit
PISS
CUNT
screw
PEEK A-BOO
?
MIGHTY SPEECHES WERE MADE TODAY BY WORLD LEADERS
BANG!
HEY, THIS IS INTRISTING!
I GOTTA GET SOMETHIN' FOR THIS CONSTIPATION
VA VA VOOM
OH BABY YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES
YUM!
YAS OH YAS!
PANT PANT
BOING!
TWEET TWEET
I'M COOK IN'!
DEAR MR. EINSTEIN: GEE WHIZ! IF "E" EQUALS "MC²", WHAT DOES "Y" EQUAL? ALSO, "I", "M", "U" AND "O"...? YOURS TRULY THE VAGABOND LOVER.
P.S. I WANT TO GO PLAY WITH MYSELF IN THE BATH ROOM
OH, NOW I GET IT!
OF COURSE
WELL WHAT D'YA KNOW!
I GET IT! YEAH!
WOW
THAT'S IT!
TOO MUCH
SNAP
OUTA SIGHT!
IT'S NEVER REALLY THE END!


EXCEPT FOR THESE GUYS!!

“Life Among the Constipated,” *Yarrowstalks* no. 3, 1967.

What Bowart and Leitch recognized was the same blend of traditional craft combined with avant-garde ambitions that New York cartooning veterans like Mike Thaler, Harvey Kurtzman, and Woody Gelman had spotted. It was evident to them that Robert was not a stoner trying out the medium, as with Bill Beckman and *Captain High*, but a disciplined artist schooled in the medium’s history and already in control of its form and content. Though he was broke and anonymous, by the fall of 1967 Robert’s vision of the medium, and America, was beginning the two-pronged course it would follow for years: mainstream exposure and underground notoriety.

Robert had no idea that this was happening. *Yarrowstalks* was an exciting project, and *Cavalier* a good payday, but nothing in his life had changed. He took walks around the neighborhood, dropping into the Psychedelic Shop and the Print Mint to check out the posters and papers. He’d observe a blond teenager named Gingerbread Princess, who wore only a long T-shirt and skipped barefoot up and down Haight Street. Sometimes he’d spot the writer Richard Brautigan, long feather in his ten-gallon hat, strolling by. Other days Robert would walk down Haight to the entrance of Golden Gate Park and watch a group of people with Down syndrome sitting on benches across from him, on a walk from a group home. In his psychedelic state Robert imagined that they were innocent and spontaneous, without an ego, and that was inspiring. All the hippies, including Robert, had big egos.

And with that ego came pride and shame, frustration and restlessness. What was he supposed to do next? So, one day in early

September 1967, six months after Dana arrived, Robert picked up his sketchbook, walked out to Oak Street, and stuck out his thumb, hoping to make it back to Chicago. He got 120 miles northeast to Auburn, California, and slept on the sidewalk, then caught a couple more rides before winding up outside of Fernley, Nevada, where he spent a day baking in the sun until an ecstatically painted decommissioned milk truck picked him up. The driver was a congenial hippie whose verbal responses were constrained to “That’s cool too!” In the back were pillows, blankets, weed, a genteel young dude from Boston doing his Kerouac bit, and two teenage runaway girls. When Boston and one runaway paired off, the other girl showed Robert her large hunting knife and made it clear she wasn’t interested in him. He opted for a nap. In Rock Springs, Wyoming, the cops took an interest. They pulled the teenagers into a squad car, impounded the truck, arrested the driver for transporting minors across state lines, and told Robert and his new traveling companion to be gone by sundown. And, oh yes, hitchhiking was illegal in Wyoming. After milling around town a while, he and Boston hopped onto a flat train car and took the rails as far as North Platte, where they were arrested by a detective for Union Pacific. It was thirty days in jail or buying two tickets on the first passenger train out of town. Robert, with astonishing chutzpah, called Dana. He groveled and she wired one hundred dollars for two tickets to Chicago. By mid-September he was back at Marty’s kitchen table, now shared with Sandra. Marty had finally “rescued” and married her, and they were living in a basement apartment surrounded by records, Sandra’s posters of Marlon Brando, and teetering piles of books and magazines. There was already an undercurrent of discontent: Robert observed Sandra’s cuttingly sarcastic remarks at Marty and sensed his old friend’s growing disinterest in anything much outside the apartment.

While Marty was at work and Sandra strummed a guitar, Robert began a new assignment Mike Thaler had arranged: six pages of comics and a full-color cover for journalist and publisher Ralph Ginzburg's upcoming square-bound magazine of art and culture, *Avant Garde*. Thaler offered his Garment District loft to stay in, so Robert finished "Av'n'Gar Comix," wrapped up the pages, and caught the Greyhound bus to New York to meet with Ginzburg and visit the city. When Robert presented his opus to Ginzburg at *Avant Garde*'s midtown offices, the editor looked puzzled. This wasn't a linear story or even a surreal poem. It was a multilayered acid fantasia. Robert had treated the six pages like his very own Sunday comics section, introducing various characters in one-off self-contained strips, and closing out the whole thing with a page reading, "Don't think about it too much, cuz YOU'RE GONNA GET THERE ANYWAY!" with his cartoon cast sitting in an all-American living room in front of the television. Ginzburg found the strip incomprehensible and rejected it on the spot. Dejected and confused, Robert packed up his pages and walked from midtown to the only other possible venue for his work he knew of in New York: the chaotic and pungent *East Village Other* office, where he had at least a shot of making a little dough and salvaging his New York trip. He left the comic, along with his name and Thaler's number, on Walter Bowart's desk.

After hanging around the *EVO* offices a bit, Robert walked back uptown to the loft. Thaler was going out that night but handed his guest a tab of acid for company. Robert was still anonymous in the city and, perhaps forgetting his experience on LSD in New York eighteen months earlier, he made himself comfortable at the kitchen table and took the tab. This was not wise: "I felt horribly alone and overwhelmed by the harshness of New York City. Soon it began to get really frightening. The roar of the giant city surrounding me, closing in on me, making my head spin. Sirens wailed in my brain, the screams of the suffering, dying masses of humanity got louder and louder. It was all like some hokey image in one of those noir movies of the late 'forties. I was about to start screaming when the phone rang." It was Walter Bowart from *EVO*. He loved the comics, wanted to publish the pages, and thought Robert was immensely talented. He spent an hour on the phone talking him down from the bad trip. Aside from publishing the orphaned strip, this was the kindest thing Bowart could have done.

While tripping, Robert wrote seventeen pages of prose under the heading "Points to Consider: New York Has Brought Me Down!"

> Why?
> I'm horny.
> New York is full of luscious-looking women.
> I don't want to play stupid games.
> I have these vague frustrations.
> Sex has me hung-up.
> I'm lonely.
> I want to achieve independence of self.
> I want things to be clear.
> I want to be able to flow through life.
> I want to fuck somebody.
> But I want it to be good. I want to love and be loved.
> I want to go to the dance of love and joy somewhere… but where's my tribe?
> I want want want
> I know desire is the fuck-up!
> What about Dana?
> Does LSD do any good?
> I want Dana. I want her to be happy.
> I want to give Dana all of me and her to give me all of her.
> I want her to be all women. Is this possible?
> ....
> SZ-SZOINK!
> ......
>
> When I think about the horrors in my mind 3 years ago… scares me to think about it… I haven't done too badly… I'm getting some control… sex is still the big mystery… what part does it play? Where does it belong?
>
> .... .
>
> I'll go back to Frisco and just start the whole bloomin' cycle all over again… can I live without Dana? Can I live with her? Are we too dependent on each other? Do we stay together because of guilt?

> …. .
>
> Guilt
>
> So Then what?
>
> Where'd the guilt come from? Parents? Untold generations? Back into what forgotten ages?
>
> My Christ complex again… I see the others like me, other gentle ones, taking all this with love… that's what it is really… that's all you can do for this… it seems… is to be gentle.
>
> …. .

The next morning he wrote a two-page critique for himself entitled "A Review of Points to Consider":

> First of all, there is Mr. Crumb in New York, thinking he has points to consider, which is not the point at all really, only he didn't know that then. I think in general Mr. Crumb belongs in the ranks of those sordid characters and frustrated creative "geniuses" who hang around slum areas of big cities and have a lot of vague "considerations" to work out and generally just wander about in the streets looking lost and dodging cars… unrealized cranks! "Hung-up" anti-social nobodies with an ax to grind whenever they can get a listen!
>
> This is not the stuff of greatness… I don't get this from Mr. Crumb's pseudo-romantic "wounded fawn" meanderings… Not in the least!!
>
> Bad vibrations he talked about… Yeah, okay, so who hasn't felt it around here… what're you, special? Now we get to the meat of the matter… he frets for a while about his energies… then says "I keep getting scattered"… might we safely suppose that Mr. Crumb is scatter-brained?? Perhaps we at last have him pegged!! In fact the only sensible thing he says in the whole essay is "SZ-ZOINK!"

The acid experience turned Robert's ruthless vision inward. The morning-after critique is, as usual, both too dismissive of the serious subjects clogging his brain and also rather accurate. Robert's constant interior dialogue never resolves, not in comics, notebooks, or correspondence. Any single solid answer was immediately suspicious. Catholicism, the Great Society, the hippies. None of it could be trusted. After his break from religion, Robert built a worldview rooted entirely in constant questioning and searching. His need to investigate himself and everything around him, combined with an understandable need for approval and pride in his work, made for chaos but kept him from falling into dogma, following any leader, or believing his own hype. This was the back-and-forth he needed to keep himself artistically vital. After that night at Thaler's, the only sensible thing was to beat it back to San Francisco, into his honey's skeptically loving arms.

When Robert returned to San Francisco in October of 1967, the Summer of Love had been eclipsed by a cold wind blowing through the Haight. All those kids had come to the city over the summer and now had nowhere to go. Methamphetamines came into the scene; hustlers and petty criminals were preying on naive stoners. The Hells Angels hangout Tracy's Doughnut Shop became more important than the Psychedelic Shop, which closed. The Thelin brothers, who opened it with hopes of a new creative economy, had become disgusted by the swift capitalist takeover of the scene. They hadn't seen anything yet.

Robert's "Life Among the Constipated" was published in *EVO* underneath the cover story "The Death of Hippie." The unsigned editorial reads: "On October 6 (one year from the enactment of the LSD law) there is going to be a funeral—the death of the hippie, the birth of free men. The procession will circumambulate the geographical Haight-Ashbury and the East Village. There will be men in the street giving out black and white armbands. There will be people in trucks, burning effigies of hippies, and a coffin, with everyone throwing in their prized possession."

The hippie had been spoiled and commodified. For *EVO*, it was all over. Robert missed the funeral and barely paid attention. He wasn't interested in hippies anyhow. Of greater interest was the sudden demand for his work. He'd inadvertently stockpiled material, so when Thaler at *Cavalier* asked to publish Robert's comics in every issue, Robert sent him the story he'd drawn on his honeymoon in 1965, "Fritz Bugs Out," and another sketchbook strip from that year, Fritz the Cat," originally intended for his imagined comic book from a couple of years earlier, *Fug.* Walter Bowart published the *Avant Garde* pages across five issues of *EVO* in October, November, and December. Thanks to the hundreds of UPS member papers, within a few months Robert's comics were in papers from Vancouver to London.

This was the material of the most ubiquitous popular culture interlocking with the hip appetite for the old and grungy aesthetics that had been wiped away by the Atomic Age. Robert was building an audience across his overlapping cultures: stoned hippies who spotted a fellow traveler, intellectuals who could see its meta-layers, and comics fans who respected the drawing and verve. There was no one else making work like him: mainstream newspaper strips trafficked in mostly square soap operas, adventure, or family fare; superheroes dominated most comic books and sold quite well. No matter how good the comic, it was always at the mercy of corporate structures and the 1954 Comics Code, which so limited what kinds of ideas and imagery could be published; moreover, the artists never owned their own work.

Other cartoonists in the nascent underground reacted to Robert as Kim Deitch had. Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez was Kim Deitch's roommate in Alphabet City. He was a stylishly handsome EC-comics-obsessed Marxist and Road Vulture Motorcycle Club member from Buffalo drawing earnest, if stoned, action and suspense comics that ran in *EVO* in early 1967, sometimes for $30 a week, sometimes for free. He sardonically remembered that "the budding underground cartoon world was in an uproar over Crumb. He was doing things other guys had wanted to do all their lives. Some went through a deep, personal crisis. Some thought about quitting cartooning forever. Others tried to commit suicide."

One guy who thought about quitting was the nineteen-year-old cartoonist Art Spiegelman. A discerning comics fan from Rego Park, Queens, he had clocked Robert's work on greeting cards and in *Help!* and begun working for Woody Gelman and Topps at age eighteen, just after Robert left. Thanks to Gelman he saw photocopies of Robert's sketchbooks, as well as *Yarrowstalks*. So, when Spiegelman made his own San Francisco pilgrimage in the fall of 1967, he went straight to Robert and Dana's Oak Street apartment and saw what Robert was working on, the forthcoming comic book *Zap*. He recalled, "I realized I needed to change my goals in the world. I decided I was going to become a Buddha because comics were going to be fine without me. When I went back to drawing comics, Crumb had set me back a lot. Every cartoonist has to pass through Crumb. What happens when you encounter Crumb is like the accelerated evolution scene in *2001*. You had to pass through him to find out what your voice might be. Crumb was radical art: he embodied the idea that comics would be a form of personal expression instead of a venue in which you might put in some personal material." There was a knock-on effect happening throughout the country. The more Robert published, the more the form grew and changed. In those feverish days, he felt he was onto something. The reaction was too profound and too emphatic to ignore.

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CHAPTER 8

Zap

It wasn't only the comics aficionados embracing Robert. The all-Crumb *Yarrowstalks* no. 3 quickly sold out its run. Letters came in from all over the country, and on a trip to London, Zahn heard nothing but praise for this new cartoon voice of the underground. Encouraged by all of this, Zahn proposed to Robert that he publish a comic book and distribute it to the burgeoning network of hippie shops popping up across the country. They'd done the tabloid, so why not try the format from which Robert's sensibility sprang? Memories of *Fug* and countless other covers drawn in his sketchbook floated through Robert's mind. He immediately agreed. In October 1967 Robert began drawing what he planned as a monthly twenty-four-page, twenty-five-cent comic book: *Zap Comix.*

Cartoonists had been trying to publish comics for adults for the better part of the decade. One-off comic pamphlets had sprung up here and there—Bowart published a tabloid psychedelic adventure comic by Spain Rodriguez called *Zodiac Mindwarp* but it failed to find an audience. Earlier in the decade, two independently published zines sprang from contributors to the college humor magazine the *Texas Ranger*: *God Nose* by Jack Jackson and *The Adventures of Jesus* by Frank Stack. Both are funny satirical riffs in a Jules Feiffer vein. The characters look just one step removed from the *Village Voice*, and the stapled pamphlets have the modest and minimal graphic design of the mimeographed poetry publications of the early 1960s next to which they would have been shelved.

But no one had taken the comic book itself as both a medium and a message, with all its constituent parts activated—size, logo, friendly colorful cover, funny animals, advertisements. There was a twofold reason for this: getting a comic book onto newsstands, comic books like *Superman* and *Archie* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*, meant entering into relationships with distributors who needed large print runs and family-friendly material to make it worth their while. After the comic book scare of the 1950s, no one was interested in taking a chance on a juvenile medium. The money was in safe quantity, not daring quality.

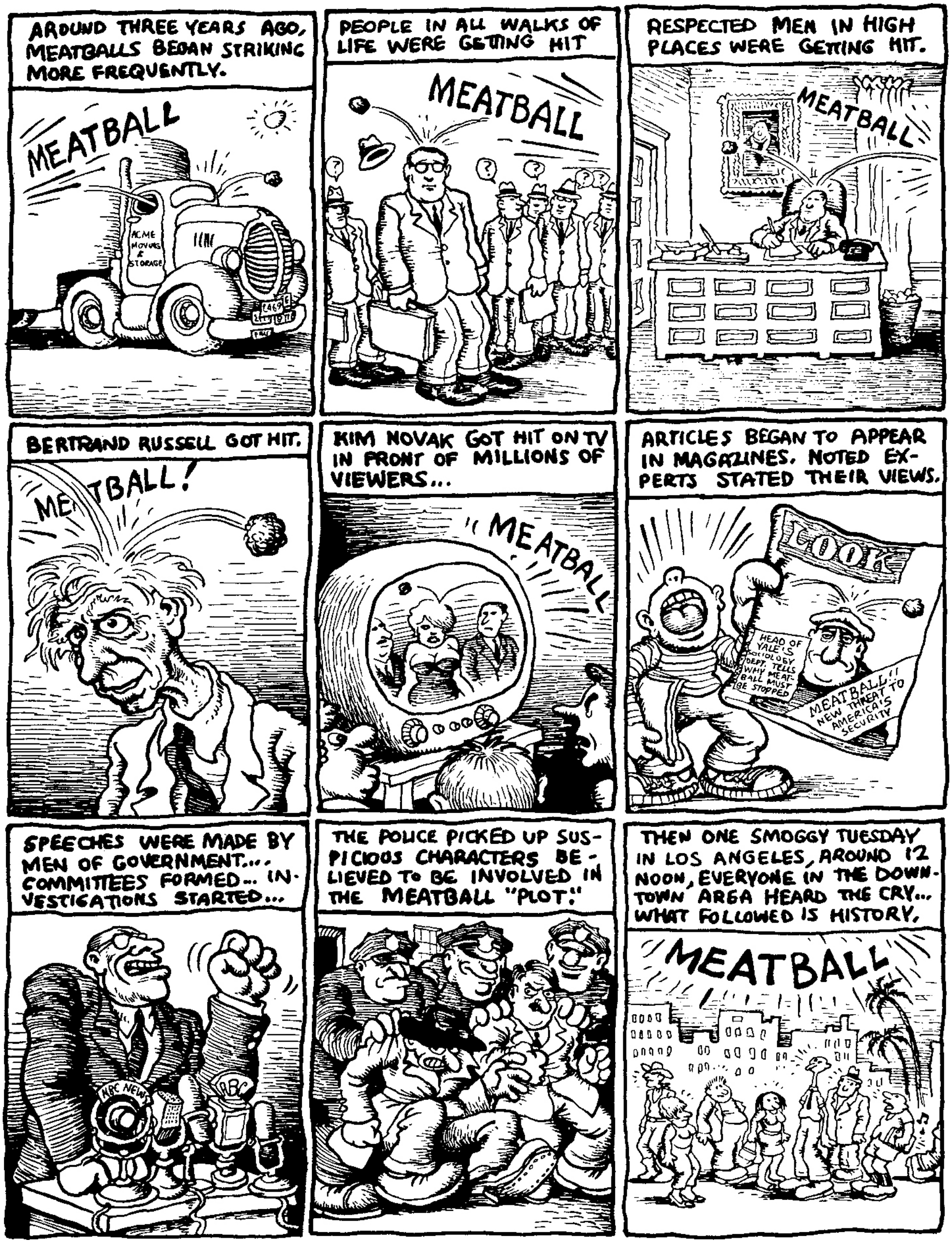
But thanks to the underground press, which had its own distribution system to bookstores and the newly burgeoning category pioneered by the Psychedelic Shop—the head shop—Zahn envisioned bypassing newsstands and delivering a bundle of comic books directly to patchouli-scented emporiums nationally.

The original *Zap* no. 1 cover depicts an electrified nude man, his rectum plugged into a light socket. No one had ever published a comic book cover with a nude figure, let alone one with his penis out, body aflame. The inside front cover features a cartoon Robert introducing himself in the one-page strip "Mr. Sketchum is at it Again!" For six panels, our bow-tie-wearing, friendly guide brings us around his studio—copies of *Mad, Humbug*, and "TITS" are near a cathedral radio and a toy car. He proclaims that *Zap* will "contain all the latest in humor! Audacious! Irreverent! Provocative! You bet!" Then Mr. Sketchum notices a "dot" on a skyscraper and takes a look with his trusty telescope, and there's "a kid," a rubber-nosed psychedelic-looking guy, waving at us and him. "See," Mr. Sketchum says, "things like that are happening all the time in these comic strips…" Robert had been drawing himself as his own protagonist for over a decade, but never for publication or with this sense of absurdity. "Mr. Sketchum" is the beginning of Robert showing the character of "R. Crumb" to readers, a cartoon avatar he would employ for decades.

Zap looked noticeably different from his earlier work. Robert was again using a crow quill pen, which allows artists to control their line density, moving from thick to thin in a single stroke, giving weight and drama to objects and scenes by adjusting their pressure on the page. Gone was the linear storytelling of *Fritz the Cat*. LSD had opened a channel into his subconscious that ushered in ideas whose real meanings were a mystery even to him. He composed *Zap* as a balance of stories rooted in either surreal happenstance, character-based humor, semipolitical essayistic comics, or visual poetry.

After the introduction comes "Meatball," which opens with a page designed right out of *Mad*: a giant title over four introductory panels. Drawn as though just inflated, and practically bouncing off the panel borders, Mrs. Yahootie and Mrs. Knish are arguing until they hear a shout of "MEATBALL!" And then Mrs. Yahootie is beaned by a meatball. She swiftly becomes "America's favorite mom." The meatballs begin hitting everyone: neurotics, hipsters, businessmen, even Bertrand Russell. The meatballs, and eventual meatball shower, cause giddiness in the streets, the government is afraid, and eventually, the meatball rain ceases. It's a story of instant, arbitrary enlightenment. An event met with glee by some, dismay by "the man," and disappointment by those who missed out. A potentially holy event reduced to a contested fad. This inspired nonsense was courtesy of a prosaic night in a spaghetti joint in Times Square; while slurping his pasta Robert listened to endless shouts of "Meatball!" from the bustling kitchen.

Elsewhere in the issue, the old guru returned in "Mr. Natural in Death Valley," both lampooning and advising spiritual help and, in what would become a tradition of essayistic comics, "City of the Future," envisioning technological towers, flying cars, and ray guns while enumerating their origins and consequences: "Everyone will be able to virtually experience everything from being Jesus Christ to blowing up the world.” Each character in these narratives is a perfect exemplar of cartooning logic: we encounter them fully formed. They exist solely for Robert to tell his audience what he needs to say. Closing out the book on the back cover is a glorious image of an enormous mother ripping up her son’s comic books. The caption: “I’ll bet this happened to you when you were a kid! Did your mother tear up YOUR comic books? Did you ever receive warnings about how comic books were going to RUIN your MIND? Were you given lectures about how comics were CHEAP TRASH put out by evil men? Do you feel a spark of GUILT every time you pick up a comic book? Do you feel like you ought to be reading a good book instead? Let ZAP comics wisk [*sic*] away all such foolish notions! Takes only 15 minutes! Read ZAP comics!—A message from your editor, R. Crumb. (This ad is not intended for the fortunates among us whose parents didn’t give a shit if they read comic books.)”


AROUND THREE YEARS AGO, MEATBALLS BEGAN STRIKING MORE FREQUENTLY.
MEATBALL
ACME MOVING & STORAGE
PEOPLE IN ALL WALKS OF LIFE WERE GETTING HIT
MEATBALL
?
?
?
??
RESPECTED MEN IN HIGH PLACES WERE GETTING HIT.
MEATBALL
BERTRAND RUSSELL GOT HIT.
MEATBALL!
KIM NOVAK GOT HIT ON TV IN FRONT OF MILLIONS OF VIEWERS...
MEATBALL
ARTICLES BEGAN TO APPEAR IN MAGAZINES. NOTED EXPERTS STATED THEIR VIEWS.
LOOK
HEAD OF YALE'S SOCIOLOGY DEPT. TELLS WHY MEATBALL MUST BE STOPPED
MEATBALL!! NEW THREAT TO AMERICA'S SECURITY
SPEECHES WERE MADE BY MEN OF GOVERNMENT.... COMMITTEES FORMED... INVESTIGATIONS STARTED...
NBC NEWS
ABC
THE POLICE PICKED UP SUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS BELIEVED TO BE INVOLVED IN THE MEATBALL "PLOT."
THEN ONE SMOGGY TUESDAY IN LOS ANGELES, AROUND 12 NOON, EVERYONE IN THE DOWNTOWN AREA HEARD THE CRY... WHAT FOLLOWED IS HISTORY,
MEATBALL

"Meatball," *Zap* no. 0, 1968.

The page imitates the hyperbolic messaging of 1950s advertising to send a clear signal to his fellow comic book fans who felt oppressed by the stigma attached to their hobby and deprived of its potential by *Seduction of the Innocent* and the Comics Code: There was something new now, and Mr. Sketchum was going to deliver. In early November he finished that first twenty-four-page issue and mailed the artwork to Zahn; he finished the planned second issue a month later. Zahn loved the content, but the cover, as he accurately described the iteration he received, depicted a "skinny naked guy with cock bobbing and electric line plugged up his ass." It was too lewd to fly with even his freewheeling distributors. He and Robert spoke by phone and agreed there would be a different cover. Soon, however, contact broke off entirely.

But Robert was too distracted with other developments to pay much attention to his would-be publisher's sudden silence. He and Dana were eating corn flakes and spaghetti, just barely getting by, their marriage as frayed as ever. UPS spread his work far and wide, but that was part of the free economy, and the "Fritz the Cat" comics in *Cavalier*, plus Dana's low-paying job at the Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers, barely covered rent, bills, and groceries for themselves and their stream of visitors. Then in November Dana told Robert she was pregnant. As vocal as Robert was in his desire not to have children, Dana was equally so in her own desire to start a family. So she stopped taking birth control. "When Dana told me she was pregnant I was utterly appalled. I basically didn't think either she or I were fit to be parents. She was hellbent to have a kid. I couldn't stop her. I told her from the beginning that I wasn't up for it and might not stick around if she went ahead with it. She always said she'd do it with or without me." With Dana pregnant, the couple was able to get on welfare. A significant segment of the hippie population was likewise subsidized. As long as Robert strolled down to the office once a month and promised to look for a job, they would get a check to keep them in tomato sauce.

Perhaps just as surprising, having drawn, but not published, two issues of *Zap*, in December of 1967 Robert was offered a publishing contract with Viking Press, then the prestigious house of James Joyce, John Steinbeck, and Graham Greene, among others. Once again, Mike Thaler had provided a connection for Robert back in New York. He'd shown "Stoned" and "Fritz Bugs Out" to William Cole, a book packager since the 1940s who kept a keen eye out for new talent. As a young editor he'd discovered and shepherded James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, among other novels. In 1965, he and Thaler coedited a comics anthology that reached back to the nineteenth century, pulled in greats from the *New Yorker*, and included younger talent like Jules Feiffer, Arnold Roth, and Shel Silverstein. Cole was putting together authors and content for Viking, perhaps most successfully with Silverstein. Cole, like Thaler, understood both the audience and lineage for adult cartooning. Cole immediately knew that Robert was a unique talent. He moved fast. First was a November 8, 1967, memo to Viking: "This is a genius cartoonist: the first really original cartoon artist to show up since Jules Feiffer. He's completely of our time, and already enjoys an underground reputation among the kids. So far he has been published in very few places—*The East Village Other, Cavalier*, and a hip magazine named *Yarrowstalks*, which gave him a whole issue. He's some kind of a recluse, who doesn't like to show his stuff to magazines. His humor is wild and far out; he draws like nobody's business—full of fascinating detail, weird backgrounds; hilarious expressions, really skilled lettering. He's in touch with what is happening with the young—drugs, sex, language ('strung out,' 'hung up,' 'a beautiful person,' 'like wow!') This should be a paperbound, 8 ½ x 10 ¾, to retail $1.95. The $1.95 price would get at the college and high school kids. Tentative title, R. CRUMB HIS BOOK. I'd cut some super-vulgarities. Assuredly someone will do this man—he's really too great to let slip."

When Cole got the green light from Viking, he asked Thaler to now sell the mysterious Crumb on the idea and introduce the two of them. Then Cole wrote Robert to offer an advance of $1,250 with a royalty of 7.5 percent for the first ten thousand copies, 10 percent on the next ten, and 12.5 percent on all copies over twenty thousand. He suggested his old friend the *Realist* founder Paul Krassner for the introduction, and said that if Paul couldn't do it, "does the name Leonard Cohen mean anything to you?" Robert responded enthusiastically and, having shipped the original art to Brian Zahn, sent along his sole set of photocopies of the first issue of *Zap*: "Received your kind letter the other day and will cooperate with you in every way I can to get this book out. Enclosed are Xerox copies of the comic book I'm putting out with a little help from some nice friends here. If you think any of this stuff would go nicely in the book, tell me and I'll send the originals (when I get them back.) My big dream is to make an honest living putting out my own comic book every month… and if this book goes over big… well, who knows… Any censoring you deem necessary for the public print is okay by me." And so it was happening. Cole as editor, Robert as artist, working together.

As 1967 turned to '68, the hippie was dead to the cognoscenti, but the teenagers and college kids who had just sampled the counterculture during the Summer of Love were only getting started. This was no longer just the realm of the poets and the freaks. It was time for business. *Rolling Stone*, conceived to both document and sell youth culture, began publishing in November 1967 underneath a logo designed by psychedelic poster artist Rick Griffin. San Francisco's house bands, Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, were now releasing records and touring nationally, and department stores were filling up with billowy shirts and smocks for hippie aspirants across the country. Robert Crumb wasn't far behind.

Ironically, it was easier getting a book contract with Viking than getting those two issues of *Zap* published. It took a rather unusual constellation of characters and events to birth that printed comic book. Charley Plymell was a thirty-two-year-old poet and publisher with a 1250 multilith offset press in his San Francisco storefront apartment. He'd emerged from the midwestern beatnik scene and established himself as a printer of chapbooks and broadsides in the Bay Area. Plymell, like his friend Allen Ginsberg, was always looking for new creative signals emerging from the culture. He'd run across Robert's work in *Yarrowstalks* 2 in July 1967 and just that September had published a tabloid-sized magazine, *Last Times*, that reprinted (without permission) "Hey Boparee Bop!," alongside Charles Bukowski, Buckminster Fuller, and Carl Solomon.

Don Donahue was a twenty-five-year-old Irish Catholic local living with his mother. In the previous years he'd tried selling dope but found steadier work typesetting for the *Berkeley Barb*, the premier underground paper of Northern California. In 1967, he watched as the circulation of the *Barb* jumped from five thousand to twenty thousand. Street vendors would buy bundles of each issue from the newspaper for fifteen cents per copy and then sell them all over the Bay Area for twenty-five cents. They also sold ecstatic, graphics-laden publications like the *Oracle*. Sales were so brisk that the youthful vendors out hawking the various papers couldn't keep up with the demand. Donahue figured that he could tap the same network for a series of single-artist tabloids. The first was to be by Robert Branaman, a beatnik artist from Kansas reputed to have made piles of drawings in the early 1960s while on LSD, mescaline, or speed. When Donahue visited him in Potrero Hill to gather up the artwork, Branaman suggested he get in touch with his old Kansas pal Charles Plymell to get some tips on printing.

When Donahue visited Plymell and explained his idea, Plymell, by way of suggesting Robert Crumb for the project, showed Donahue "Hey Boparee Bop!" Donahue remembered: "I had never seen anything like it before. I had had dreams about things like that, but I didn't really imagine anything like that before. Charley and I both went out of our heads. It was one of the heaviest things we'd seen around in a long time. We assumed that the name R. Crumb was a pseudonym because it fit in with the work. It didn't seem like a real name." Soon after, they saw "Life Among the Constipated" and decided the artist had to be found and published. They called *Yarrowstalks* in Philadelphia and *EVO* in New York—no one knew how to find Robert.

It turned out he was just a few blocks away. In January 1968, Donahue was introduced to him at a party in the Haight. They got to talking and Donahue floated the idea of the tabloid. Robert told him he wasn't interested in that format but did have an entire comic book finished and no one to publish it. Donahue readily agreed to that project instead. Since Cole had the only photocopies of the planned *Zap* number 1, Donahue could publish what was to have been *Zap* 2. Viking, Robert reasoned, would want to publish the material anyway, but that was a different, square-world audience. Publishing the *Zap* comic books was for the heads. The only hitch was that Donahue was neither a printer nor a publisher. He was also broke. What he lacked in those departments he made up in dedication and hustle.

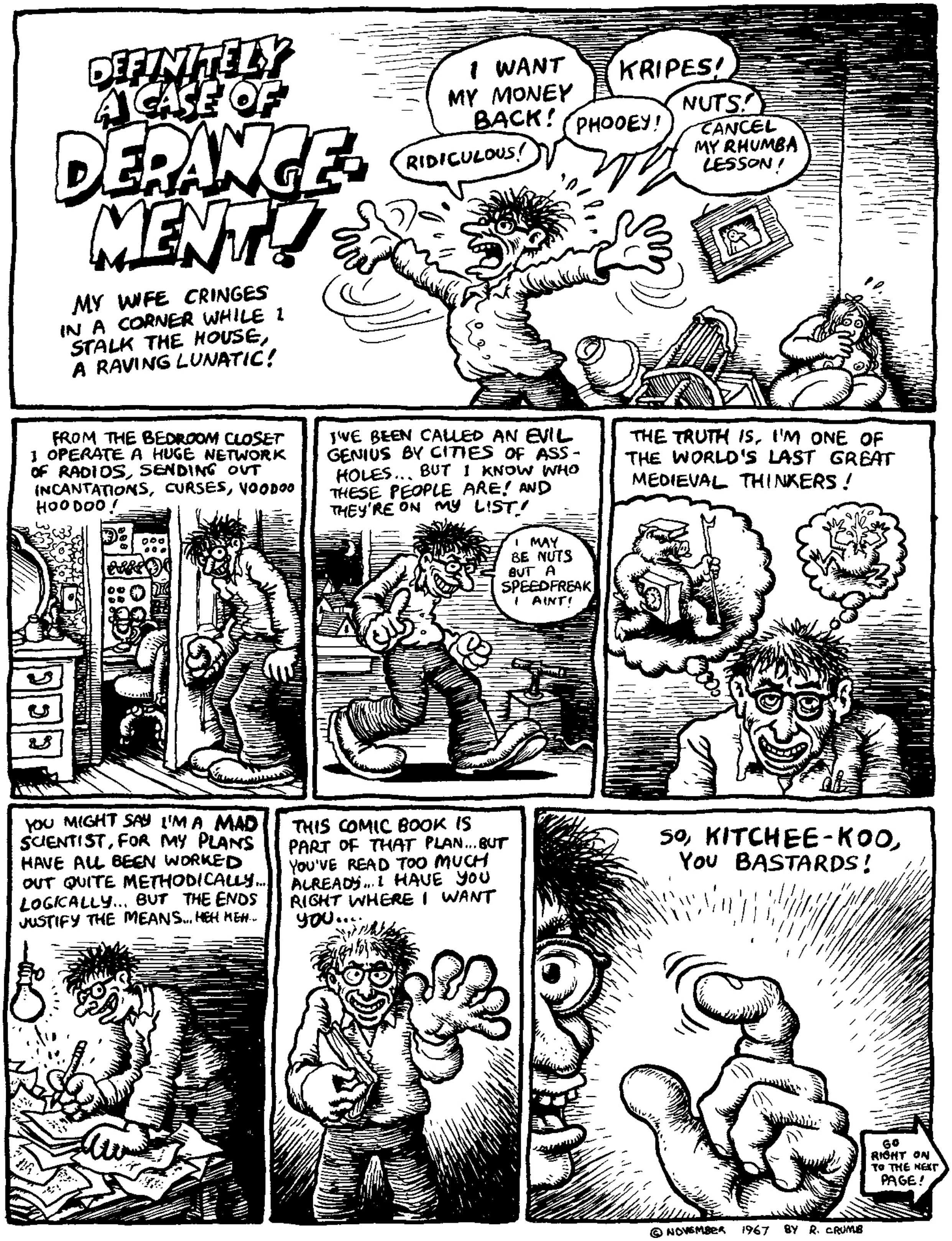
After the initial meeting, a few weeks went by, with Robert, hot to finally get *Zap* off the ground, calling Donahue to urge him along. Eventually, Donahue traded Plymell a $200 reel-to-reel Concord tape recorder in exchange for Plymell printing the job, Robert and Dana borrowed $500 from a friend to buy the newsprint paper for the interiors, and Donahue bought a scrap lot of heavier stock for the covers. The press could only take sheets of ten-by-fifteen-inch paper, producing a seven-by-ten-inch folded folio. Robert made the three-color separations for the cover himself, and with Donahue assisting, Plymell operated the press, which was intended for sturdier paper than newsprint, so, as he put it, he "would have to make the multilith dance and sing" to get it to accept and then transfer ink to the sheets without chewing them up. It took a few weeks due to constant difficulties with the machine, but they managed to print around four thousand sets of interior sheets and covers of *Zap* no. 1. The back cover of that first printing bore the legend "Printed by Charles Plymell," a traditional credit held over from the Beats and forever marking *Zap* as a true home-brewed object. When the final sheets slipped off the press, everyone went back to Oak Street for beer, pot, and a cake iced with the cover image. And for a moment, they all sat on the floor staring at Robert's collection of old radios, uncertain what to do next.

The cover of *Zap* no. 1 is layered with past and future—the drawing once again appears both nostalgic and contemporary. Designed in the fashion of 1940s comic books—title across the top third, image occupying the rest—it also included the contemporary warning, "For adult intellectuals only!" as both a signal and a hopeful attempt (suggested by Donahue) at avoiding an obscenity bust. Every comic book has to be published by an entity, so Donahue called his "Apex Novelties," the perfect generic name for a company that could've easily sold fake teeth or toy inflatables. *Zap* would look just like the objects Robert and his generation grew up with. Instead of the usual insignia stating "Approved by the Comics Code of America," Robert placed another psychedelic signal: "Approved by the Ghost Writers in the Sky." And once again quoting Gershon Legman to signal his part in comic book history, the cover banner proclaims: "*Zap* Comics are Squinky Comics!!" This was a declaration, mostly from the artist to himself, that his work would both embody and critique the derangement underneath the veneer of American propriety.

Below all this signifying language is an image much like his 1966 drawing of “Sludge no. 12,” now featuring Mr. Natural, driving an exhausted and bruised classic cartoon jalopy. Next to him a lady with a flowerpot on her head asks, “I wish somebody would tell me what ‘Diddy-wah-diddy’ means…,” which was a line from the 1929 Blind Blake song “Diddie Wa Diddie.” The response, supposedly what Fats Waller told an older white woman asking the meaning of jazz, was: “If you don’t know now lady, don’t mess with it!” The jalopy putters past a cityscape heading straight for a manhole crowded with faces looking out to certain doom. A fella walks by and exclaims, “Is dis a system?,” an evergreen phrase coined by the Yiddishkeit cartoonist Milt Gross forty years before that cuts through all boundaries—hippie system, straight system, broken system—with an enormous shrug.

No other psychedelic object, to say nothing of a comic book, looked like this: where was the illegible lettering, the Art Nouveau forms, the vibrating colors, or the groovy dude cocking an eyebrow? Robert’s cover hits all the subliminal notes of his generation’s hazy past and present, while digging deep into American popular culture. In a single issue, Robert offered the entertainment his audience longed for and the stoned-out funnies they needed. Something to read and talk about, something to smoke with. The inside front cover revisits Robert, now as a “raving lunatic,” wife naked and cowering in the corner as he prowls the apartment rambling about his communication plans, of which this comic book is just a part. The final panel invites readers in: “So, kitchee-koo, you bastards!”

Each story unselfconsciously taps an aspect of the American mythology and contains a moment of revelation offset by a gag. Taken together the comics become a sensibility that is at once exploratory, hopeless, cynical, naive, amused, angry. It reads as easily now as it did then. “Whiteman” begins: “Poor ol’ Whiteman is on the verge of a nervous breakdown! He’s a real product of the Great Depression!” Whiteman, drawn with thick, urgent lines, is essentially Robert’s vision of Chuck’s generation. He puffs up with patriotism and sags with frustration; his body starts to come apart like taffy with urges sexual or violent; and eventually, in the fourth and final page, he is chased through dim city streets and confronted by a group of stereotypical minstrel-show Black men—they pull his pants down, tell him he’s “a nigger like evva body else.” By the end, Whiteman, no longer wearing his Stetson, his Brylcreemed hair a mess, considers whether or not he should “join the parade.” Robert’s critique of his father’s masculinity is dead-on—he could be rendered impotent through a simple encounter with the “other,” represented here by racist Sambo figures. This, Robert suggests, is how all white people see the Black population. It is, at the very least, the vision of race with which he was indoctrinated as a child. Not just in the language he heard, but in the how-to-cartoon manuals he would have perused. Stereotypes of all races and ethnicities were a standard tool in the cartoonist’s communication toolbox for the first half of the twentieth century, and racism was part of the American vernacular.


DEFINITELY A CASE OF DERANGE-MENT!
I WANT MY MONEY BACK!
KRIPES!
NUTS!
PHOOEY!
RIDICULOUS!
CANCEL MY RHUMBA LESSON!
MY WIFE CRINGES IN A CORNER WHILE I STALK THE HOUSE, A RAVING LUNATIC!
FROM THE BEDROOM CLOSET I OPERATE A HUGE NETWORK OF RADIOS, SENDING OUT INCANTATIONS, CURSES, VOODOO HOODOO!
I'VE BEEN CALLED AN EVIL GENIUS BY CITIES OF ASS-HOLES... BUT I KNOW WHO THESE PEOPLE ARE! AND THEY'RE ON MY LIST!
I MAY BE NUTS BUT A SPEEDFREAK I AINT!
THE TRUTH IS, I'M ONE OF THE WORLD'S LAST GREAT MEDIEVAL THINKERS!
YOU MIGHT SAY I'M A MAD SCIENTIST, FOR MY PLANS HAVE ALL BEEN WORKED OUT QUITE METHODICALLY... LOGICALLY... BUT THE ENDS JUSTIFY THE MEANS... HEH HEH..
THIS COMIC BOOK IS PART OF THAT PLAN... BUT YOU'VE READ TOO MUCH ALREADY... I HAVE YOU RIGHT WHERE I WANT YOU....
SO, KITCHEE-KOO, YOU BASTARDS!
GO RIGHT ON TO THE NEXT PAGE!
© NOVEMBER 1967 BY R. CRUMB

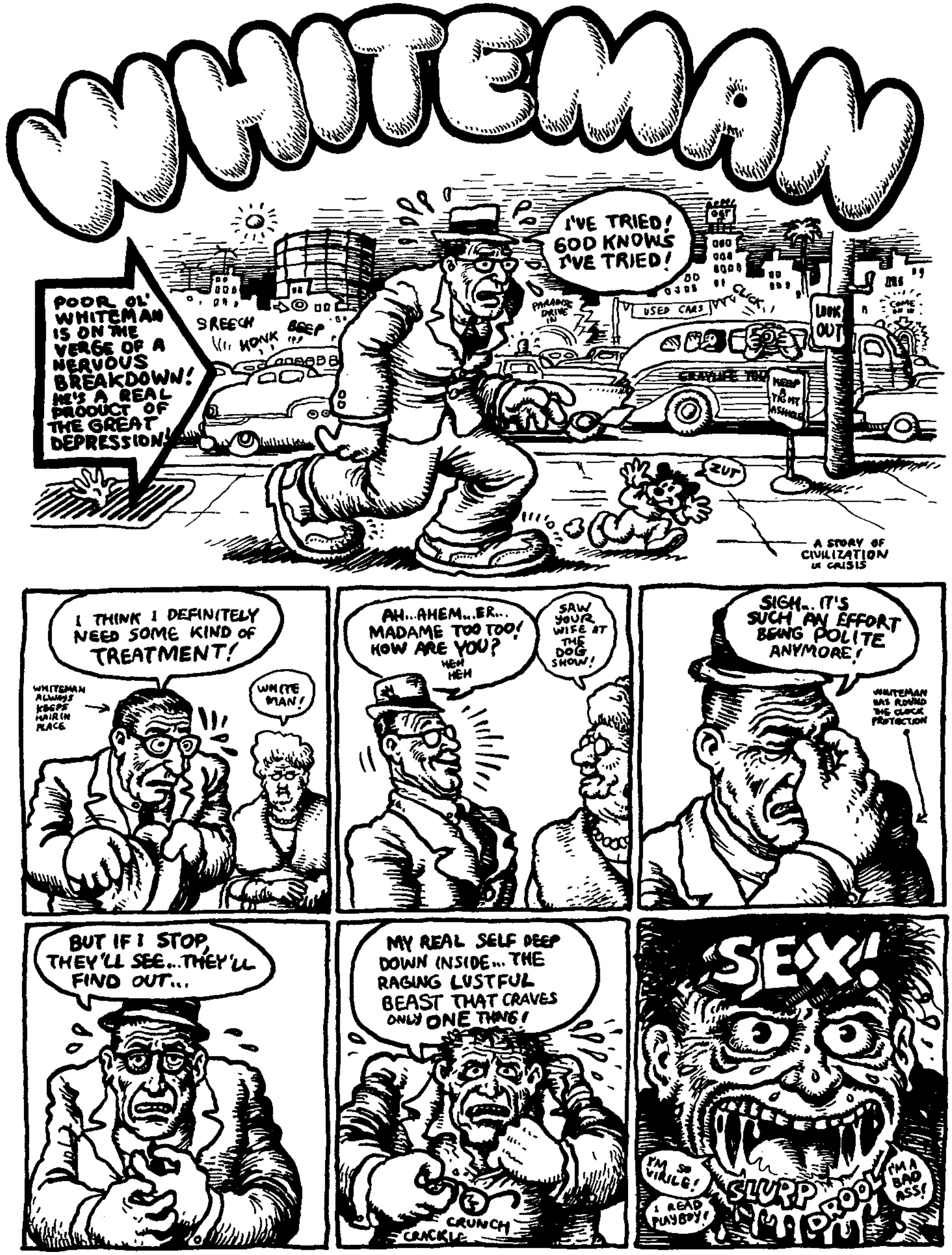
Inside-cover comic, *Zap* no. 1, 1968.

Robert's vision of white masculinity as based on self-loathing, fear, and oppression could only be communicated through cartoon transgression. While adopting the trappings of a mass medium, Robert was acting with the absolute freedom of a contemporary artist rather than the concerns of a published satirist. The contemporaneous Black response to this work is unrecorded. Writer Ishmael Reed, one of the founding editors at *EVO*, thought it was harmless but foolish work. The prolific muralist and educator Dewey Crumpler, who was there in the Bay Area as a teenager working alongside the Black Panthers, defends Robert's right to make it, and emphasizes the courage it takes to stand and face the consequences. But he notes that "Crumb lives in this world of Euro-centric testing and purging. He used stereotypes he's attracted to as a kid, and purged them by playing them out. He had that privilege, even if he was, by class and temperament, an outsider." What most intrigued Crumpler was the idea that Robert embodied the American racial psychosis—that the making and reception of the work contains racism as much as it critiques it. Crumpler's response in many ways echoes Robert's: Robert himself was the thing he hated.

In the six-page story "Mr. Natural Visits the City," our man visits Flakey Foont, who forever represents the uptight, put-upon side of his creator. Foont is tripping on LSD, and ol' Mr. Natural traipses in to offer some wisdom: maybe he should visit a farm! He fixes an enormous Dagwood sandwich from Foont's streamlined fridge, eats it all, and then, presenting the other side of his creator, proclaims a secret: "The whole universe is completely insane!" The snappy patter was familiar from two-person comedy routines, the characters of the rube and the huckster from film and television, but the punch line was entirely of the moment. The world, it looked completely insane, and Robert was navigating it alongside his audience.

Also in the issue was a page that would cause him years of agony but seemed like a fine idea at the time. He returned to his 1966

Chicago sketchbook pages for “Keep on Truckin’…,” a five-panel visual song depicting cylindrical characters seemingly made of rubber doing just that. “Truckin’” was slang for “doing all right” in those days. It was also a popular dance in the late 1930s, and Robert’s words were adapted from Blind Boy Fuller’s 1936 song “Truckin’ My Blues Away.” A showman hot-stepping, “truckin’ on down the line…”; a bow-tied dude faces him, legs in front, leaning way back, “Hey Hey Hey…”; the next tier begins with neighborhood kids moseying down a suburban sidewalk underneath the line “I said keep on Truckin’…”; and finally, two black-suited and bow-tied fellas marching down the street, heads and torsos forward, above them the final phrase: “Truckin’ my blues away!” The simple structure of the page—a title and then a zigzag, each verse echoed by a change in direction of each character, makes it syncopated—a pleasure to read.

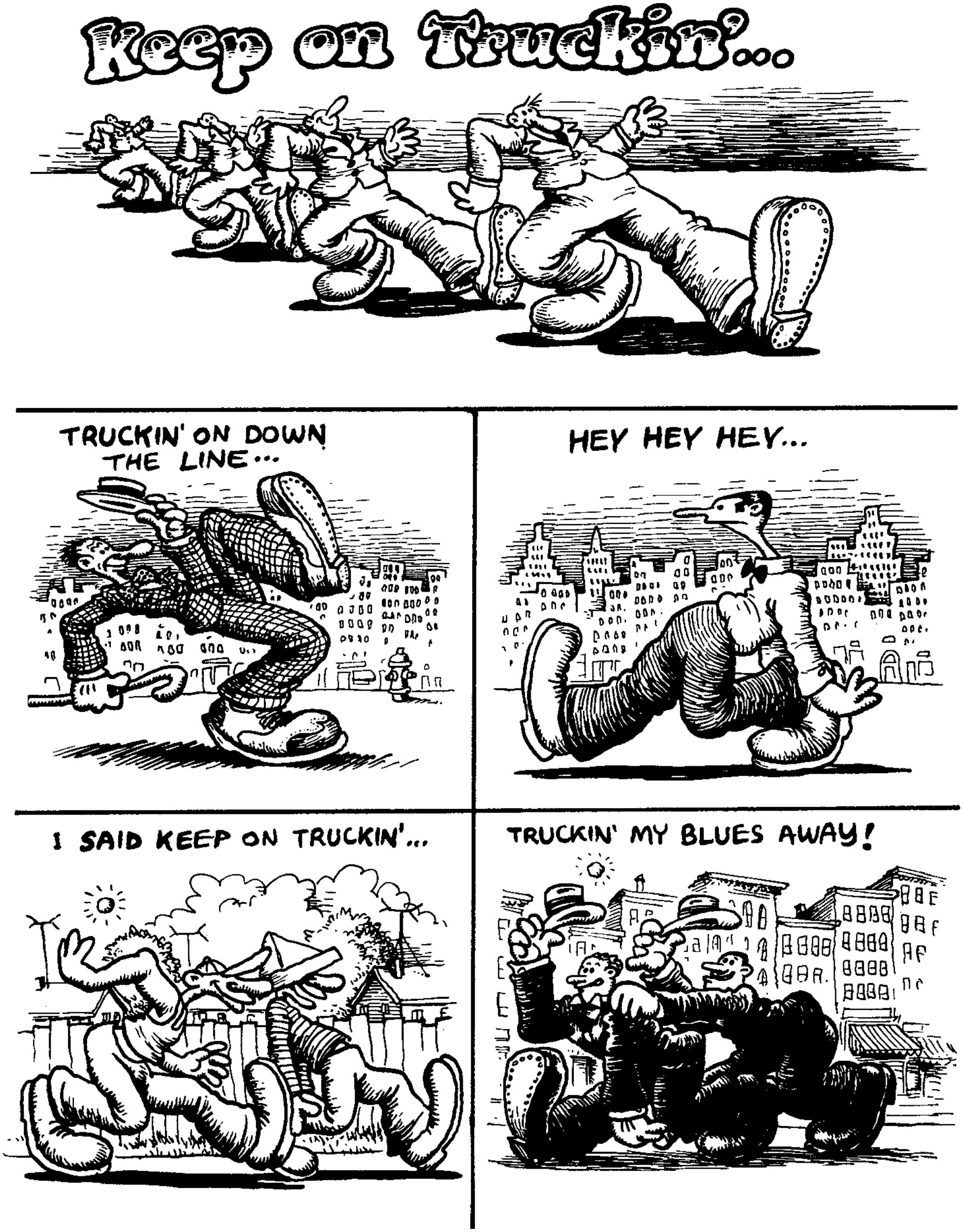

WHITEMAN
POOR OL' WHITEMAN IS ON THE VERGE OF A NERVOUS BREAKDOWN! HE'S A REAL PRODUCT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION!
I'VE TRIED! GOD KNOWS I'VE TRIED!
SREECH
HONK
BEEP
PARADISE DRIVE IN
USED CARS
CLICK
LOOK OUT
COME ON IN
GRAYLINE TOU
KEEP A TIGHT ASSHOLE
ZUT
A STORY OF CIVILIZATION IN CRISIS
I THINK I DEFINITELY NEED SOME KIND OF TREATMENT!
WHITEMAN ALWAYS KEEPS HAIR IN PLACE
WHITE MAN!
AH...AHEM...ER... MADAME TOO TOO! HOW ARE YOU? HEH HEH
SAW YOUR WIFE AT THE DOG SHOW!
SIGH.. IT'S SUCH AN EFFORT BEING POLITE ANYMORE!
WHITEMAN HAS ROUND THE CLOCK PROTECTION
BUT IF I STOP, THEY'LL SEE...THEY'LL FIND OUT...
MY REAL SELF DEEP DOWN INSIDE... THE RAGING LUSTFUL BEAST THAT CRAVES ONLY ONE THING!
CRUNCH
CRACKLE
SEX!
I'M SO VIRILE!
I READ PLAYBOY!
SLURP
DROOL
I'M A BAD ASS!

"Whiteman," *Zap* no. 1, 1968.

Truckin' was the mode of the day. Truck on down Haight Street, relaxed, blissed out, right into Golden Gate Park. Cruise through the park, go right on over the bridge, and hitchhike across the country—truckin'! The page, like much else in the issue, became its own phenomenon. It was immediately bootlegged internationally—there were, and are, truckin' posters, mugs, stickers, mud flaps, and an endless stream of parodies and homages. The Incredible Hulk was drawn "truckin'" and John Lennon was photographed with his legs splayed, torso back; it remains ubiquitous.

The printing of *Zap* number 1 was just the beginning of the publishing process. They had the sheets, but they needed to be collated, folded, stapled, and trimmed to the edges. There were multiple folding parties through April with Dana, Donahue, and a group of friends that included various Cleveland transplants, and really anyone who stopped by their apartment. On February 25, 1968, Donahue, Dana, Robert, and friends waded out into a street party on Haight and started offering the comic book for sale just like any other street vendors. Despite the legend that Robert and Dana sold the comic book out of a baby carriage on the corner of Haight and Ashbury (perpetuated by a widely circulated drawing by Robert), they in fact never did. Dana carried copies in the carriage to deliver to shops, but mostly they held stacks in their hands, splitting up so they'd reach the most potential customers.

Robert got some blank stares, some outright disbelief that he was selling a comic book, and a few takers. Dana remembered, "Some people would just buy it and give me the quarter and not look at it. Other people would look at it and give me the quarter. I'd come home with pockets bulging with old-fashioned quarters."


Keep on Truckin'...
TRUCKIN' ON DOWN THE LINE...
HEY HEY HEY...
I SAID KEEP ON TRUCKIN'...
TRUCKIN' MY BLUES AWAY!

“Keep on Truckin’…,” *Zap* no. 1, 1968.

They did all right that first day, pocketing $20.50. The following day, they sold five hundred copies for $45 to Third World Distribution on Haight Street, which already sold *EVO* and the very young *Rolling Stone* to head shops and bookstores all over Northern California. They sold out within weeks. And then, suddenly, they needed more, and soon queries were coming from across the country. The informal crew kept assembling copies as fast as they could, but Robert and Donahue had no idea how to really get it out past California. From spring into summer of 1968, Robert said, they "took them around to stores and [they] sold them on the streets and at love-ins and all that." There weren't any comic book stores then, and even if it was possible to break into newsstand distribution, they'd have to find a contact in that mob-run world and *Zap* would be shelved with porn. Very few bookstores were going to take it either. They needed a national distribution network, which the poster publishing and distributing company the Print Mint could readily provide.

The independent businesses that initially sold the counterculture were often rooted in old relationships from bohemias past. The Print Mint was founded by Don and Alice Schenker in 1965 as a kiosk within the Berkeley bookstore Moe's Books (which is still standing today). The couple were friends and compatriots with store owner Moe Moskowitz from the mid-1950s downtown New York poetry and theater scenes. The Schenkers initially offered fine art reproductions and framing but soon began selling and nationally distributing Personality Posters (enormous black and white images of Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, James Dean, and other icons of American glamour), paintings, and their own productions, as well. Soon they hired Bob Rita, a native Hawaiian, former farmworker, and agricultural labor organizer, as well as an aspiring art dealer named Simon "Si" Lowinsky, to help run the shop and wholesale operation. In late 1966 the Print Mint opened on Haight Street and began selling and distributing the psychedelic posters proliferating all around it. During the height of the poster boom, from 1966 to 1968, the Print Mint created a national distribution network of hundreds of stores, many of them in college towns.

Life magazine gave them a boost in its September 1, 1967, issue, hailing "walls and walls of expendable art." Alice Schenker remembered, "People came to us in droves, people from all over the country. We made a ton of money, but it wasn't something we could have ever predicted. When the Haight-Ashbury scene was going good, we were just another one of the classic businesses that were gathering points, central locations in the midst of all the chaos. The whole San Francisco operation—employees giving away posters in the midst of selling them, cops busting crowds of people in front of our store, and all the wonderful art on our walls and ceilings..." So when Robert and Donahue needed to unload *Zap* number 1 nationally, Print Mint was the pipeline to the enormous network of stores that were buying posters. This was a network of culture built by idealists without a real hierarchy, allowing experimental work to find a wide audience.

In April, Topps's Woody Gelman, ever the connector, bought twenty-five copies of *Zap* 1 for fifteen cents a pop for a total of $3.75. Robert reported that he was looking for New York distribution: "It's selling really well here. Sold 3500 copies already! We're almost out of the first printing, but will go into 2nd printing soon.... Lots of stuff in the works! By the way! Dana had a baby boy April 1st! Incredible! These are great days for me!" Gelman wrote back on stationery designed by Robert just two years before, sweetly enclosing a check for twenty dollars for the comic books and "a small bit of change for [Robert's] son." He'd shown *Zap* to Art Spiegelman and another early fan, historian and cartoonist Bhob Stewart, who "love[d] it." For distribution he suggested getting in touch with Mike McInerney, an active member of comic book and science fiction fandom and employee at Bookmasters, an all-night shop in Times Square that, according to a wry article by Gay Talese, contained ten thousand paperbacks, and "cater[ed], after 4 am, to several literate insomniacs." And so, *Zap* went to New York. In May, a few weeks later, Robert would declare that *Zap* number 1 had sold out its four-thousand-copy print run. Keeping the operation within the tight circle, when the time came to reprint the first issue Don Donahue bought Plymell's printing press and Moe Moskowitz fronted the money for an additional five thousand copies.

If Robert's underground newspaper comics inspired cartoonists to dig into their own sensibilities and explore the medium, *Zap* suddenly offered a new way to think about and publish their work. The erstwhile *Help!* contributor Gilbert Shelton was living in Austin, Texas, making funny and highly readable stories for the local underground paper about his latest creation, a trio of goofy stoners named the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. He was imagining that he might reprint the strips in a tabloid sometime down the line or perhaps a magazine, if he could find a publisher. Encountering *Zap* made him realize that he, too, could make his own comic book. What would soon be called "underground comics" was a format over which the artist would have complete control. No more depending on newspapers or trying to sell ideas to magazines. In the summer of 1968, he drew and printed his debut, *Feds 'n' Heads Comics*, and, following Robert's example, devoted the top third of the cover to a logo and the rest to a single image: an obese cop approaching a blissed-out hippie. You couldn't miss it. *Feds 'n' Heads Comics*, like *Zap*, was intended for mass counterculture consumption. Shelton was, like Robert, a child of Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad*, a practiced yarn-spinner whose roots were firmly in satire and parody. He wanted to entertain his readers.

Anticipating the birth of their child, earlier in 1968 Robert and Dana had moved a few blocks away to a larger, two-bedroom flat in a modest, shingled Victorian building at 705 Clayton Street for which they paid $100 a month. They decorated the living room with a mix of family photos and thrift-store finds and the bedroom with an array of Robert's artwork. Robert's studio was a back pantry just off their bedroom; he drew on a desk made from an old door across two dressers. It was forever covered with artwork, comic books, pamphlets, and whatever else came through the door. The Crumbs added a new roommate who'd arrived in a caravan from Cleveland. Along with Jeff Kessler and a young medical student named Shelly Rosen, Eric Preisler was part of a trio of Jewish boys, pals from Cleveland Heights High, who were regular visitors to Robert and Dana's home in the final years of the decade. Eric was precisely the kind of handsome, easygoing hippie dude that Robert alternately envied and resented. He spent his time in Golden Gate Park playing bongos and Frisbee, selling a little weed on the side, and often returning to the apartment with a young hippie woman he'd just met in the park. He had a hometown rapport with Dana and appreciated her no-nonsense approach to running the household. On April 1 Dana gave birth to a healthy baby boy with clear blue eyes at the University of California Moffitt Hospital: Jesse David Crumb.

They added a crib to the apartment, Dana nested and nursed, but little else changed. With a new baby to care for, Clayton Street couldn't be a hippie crash pad. Nevertheless, there were plenty of people sitting around the living room or in Eric's bedroom smoking pot and listening to the latest rock records. Robert loved Jesse but he just wasn't ready for parenting, didn't know how to manifest that affection. She remembered, "Robert never pushed the baby carriage, never changed a diaper, never did a fucking thing when Jesse was a baby. Didn't do it. Never! Never! Never! Crumb did not want the responsibility, the commitment, the burdens, or the joys of parenthood." Robert agrees with Dana's assessment: "Of course I couldn't help but love Jesse when I saw him, but even so, I came and went; I refused to be forced into the father role that I never wanted and told her over and over that I didn't want. I couldn't do it! The last thing I wanted at that point in my life was to be a father and have parental responsibilities. I didn't even want to be married."

Robert had absolutely no model for how to be an adult in the world, let alone a parent. But he had developed, as a lot of artists do, a survival instinct, which didn't always extend to those around him. In those days he was still escaping—from home, from Dana, from bourgeois expectations, even from his own kid. He needed to do things his way and needed to pursue himself. That he couldn't leave Dana, and thus couldn't prevent having a child, is typical of his own internal confusion—he wanted a mommy but not a wife. A sexual partner but not a relationship. He wanted a home but no responsibilities. This was a fairly common dynamic in the counterculture—women were supposed to be sexually liberated but not from cooking and housecleaning.

Back in Philadelphia, Charles understood the gravity of recent events better than his brother, writing: "I'm no Doctor Spock but I'm nevertheless going to venture to give you some brief and (I think) sensible advice on the subject of raising children. Here it is: Never do or say anything in the child's presence that will impose on it a sense of FEAR, or GUILT or SHAME. Don't even (if you can possibly help it) mention the word GOD in its presence." He goes on to strongly suggest that they avoid dualistic thinking, to encourage the child to see people as people first, above all other characteristics. Days later he continued the letter, having received *Zap*: "Truly great work. I feel compelled to take back what I said to you last time you were here. It would seem to me now after reading 'Whiteman' that you can in fact say as much through the medium of the comic strip as you can through that of the novel. Alas! There's a little bit of 'Whiteman' in all of us. But it’s often easy enough to pose problems. Where does the solution come in? The whole magazine was great. Just let me enjoy it and don’t expect me to make comments. You talk in your letter about the only thing you’re ‘worried about is if both of us are mature enough to handle the responsibility’ of bringing a child into the world. You frighten me somewhat when you use words like ‘responsibility’! Just take it easy and don’t worry about it!… You’ve got no more right to brood over the past than you do to worry over much about the future. The trouble with me is that I never really got out of Milford High School. I’m still nursing the wounds I suffered there.”

Charles, who was always the teacher, conceded Robert’s decade-old argument that comics could indeed contain a life. He also, as he would in future letters, declared his own entrapment. Robert did what his mentor couldn’t—he escaped and made precisely his own art on his own terms.

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CHAPTER 9

Johnny Appleseed

Everyone was surprised by the sudden success of *Zap* 1, especially, to their chagrin, Robert and his new publisher, Don Donahue. "I liked Donahue," Robert says, "he was a great guy, Donahue, a real character. But he was totally inept at business." They briefly had big plans for Apex Novelties—a tabloid called *Stoned* was hatched (and published years later as a pamphlet), and Robert imagined a cooperative company of like-minded cartoonists. But the revolution briefly sputtered simply because Donahue couldn't print at the level and quantity that Robert suddenly needed. And something else was happening: *Zap* had found an audience larger than anyone had ever imagined. Suddenly, like the psychedelic poster two years before, it was beckoning rebellious artists and cartoonists looking for a city and a figurehead to call their own.

Hard-drinking, tall, and stoop-shouldered S. Clay Wilson arrived in San Francisco just as *Zap* was rolling off Plymell's multilith. Born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, Wilson, like Robert, grew up drawing endless pages of comics for his own entertainment, but instead of autobiography and funny animals it was horror, pirates, western outlaws, and motorcycle gangs. In the 1960s he attended the University of Nebraska, fell in love with the Beats, motorcycles, and beer. Joining the vibrant poetry and art scene in mid-1960s Lawrence, Kansas, Wilson dropped acid and began drawing dense pictures of violence and deviancy. That year he published artwork in the town's house organ, *Grist*, which included William S. Burroughs, Ishmael Reed, and others. He made his debut in the seventh issue, coedited and printed by Charles Plymell on a return trip to his home state. Plymell and his coeditor and publisher, the bookseller John Fowler, were so taken with Wilson's work that they printed and published the portfolio that would be Wilson's calling card: *Twenty Drawings*, released in an edition of 525 at the end of 1967.

When early 1968 rolled around, Wilson and a couple of friends heard the call of San Francisco and headed west. He rolled into San Francisco and soon visited Plymell's place, where he and Donahue were printing *Zap*. Wilson knew Robert's work from *EVO* and *Cavalier*, but this new format was a revelation. After looking through the portfolio, Donahue took Wilson over to Robert's place on Oak Street. Robert remembers: "I studied the portfolio of drawings he had handed to me as he kept up a rapid, inspired patter, full of white-hot enthusiasm for a vast gamut of cultural subjects. In fact, I was being blasted away, dissolved, atomized! It looked like folk art, like old-time tattoos, like some demented high school hot rodder's notebook drawings. The drawings were rough, crazy, lurid, coarse, deeply American, a taint of white-trash degeneracy. The content was something like I'd never seen before, anywhere, the level of mayhem, violence, dismemberment, naked women, loose body parts, huge, obscene sex organs, a nightmare vision of hell-on-earth never so graphically illustrated before in the history of art. After the breakthrough that Wilson had somehow made, I no longer saw any reason to hold back my own depraved id in my work." That afternoon they smoked a joint and Wilson suggested—strongly—that he and Robert make a drawing together in Robert's sketchbook. Though Robert wasn't interested in "jamming" with anyone, he was overpowered by the force of Wilson's presence. Meeting Wilson and seeing how easily they collaborated opened up the possibility in Robert's mind that *Zap* could house other visions, too, just like Kurtzman's *Mad* and *Humbug*. Much like when he discovered comic book fanzines in the late 1950s, he realized he wasn't alone in this new form. Robert wanted the feeling he had with collaborators like Charles, Mike Britt, and Marty Pahls—a local gang with which to share sensibilities and who could push each other along. Within a few weeks, Robert invited Wilson to contribute to *Zap* number 2.

Now Robert wondered who else might fit into the comic book. One afternoon in April 1968 poster artist and surf cartoonist Rick Griffin arrived home to find Robert patiently waiting on his stoop. Robert loved Griffin's comic-strip-format *Sunday Funnies* poster from the year before, and the man himself was just as he'd hoped—soft-spoken, kind, and mystical in bearing. They both admired early-twentieth-century illustration, Carl Barks, and Harvey Kurtzman. Griffin told him that he and the poster artist Victor Moscoso were already working on collaborative psychedelic comic strips, drawing one panel at a time and arranging them intuitively, planning their own full-color publication on quality paper. At that, Robert extended the invitation to join *Zap*. With Griffin came Moscoso, who recognized a fellow cosmic traveler ("'Approved by the ghost writers in the sky'? Holy shit!") and a good business opportunity. He was already publishing and selling his own posters for a dollar each through his company Neon Rose, so a fifty-page comic book could be fifty cents—a penny a page. Doing a black and white comic like *Zap* would be much cheaper than doing a color magazine, and if it was cheaper to produce, they could charge less and sell more. Suddenly there were four *Zap* voices covering distinct quadrants of the visual playing field: the grotesque, hippie modernism, acid visions, and social satire.

Moscoso, an unusually handsome and confident operator, took one look at the state of Don Donahue's disorganized setup and suggested they not only distribute through Print Mint (which had just begun its own comics anthology, *Yellow Dog*) but publish with it as well. The new foursome met with the Print Mint's Don Schenker and Moe's Books' Moe Moskowitz, at the home of Moscoso's lawyer

Michael Stepanian. Stepanian, tough-minded and fit from years of playing rugby, along with the equally verbose and protective Brian Rohan, were the young lawyers to the musicians, dope dealers, and artists of the counterculture. Moskowitz agreed to fund the printing of *Zap* number 2, to be released in late June, and the Print Mint agreed to handle the publishing and distribution logistics. After Schenker and Moskowitz recouped the costs, the Print Mint and the *Zap* artists would split the profits based on the quantity of interior pages each artist published in any given issue. The front and back covers were each of equivalent monetary value as two pages. In keeping with the communitarian ethos of the time (and perhaps also to avoid having to assume the responsibility of a leader), Robert proposed that *Zap* would be a cooperative: Each artist had equal ownership. Moscoso trademarked the name (thus preventing a future avalanche of "*Zap Comix*" branded merchandise) and filed for the copyright certificate. Stepanian came up with the legal language to print in the colophon by sending his secretary out to a newsstand to buy an issue of *Captain America*. He simplified Marvel's language, and voilà, legal protection.

Zap number 2 begins with one of Robert's most psychedelic images—a riff on those Z-grade 1940s and '50 children's comic book covers often drawn by the great journeyman Al Fago. The cover is also a callback to the "kid" on the inside front cover of the original *Zap*, but now he's ringing like a pinball machine, his face outlined in impossibly thick lines, echoed by slivers of rose red against a pink flesh tone, making the image gently vibrate. His jelly bean eyes are wide open and pinned together, his spiky hair aflame. It's as psychedelic an image as Robert ever drew—instantly recognizable and deeply strange.

The only announcement that this second issue of *Zap* would be a different animal is the opening page: a Rick Griffin sequence of eyeballs, scarabs, Donald Duck, mice, hearts, and everlasting surrealist horizons. Moscoso's and Wilson's contributions were just as destabilizing—the former with a delicate Rapidograph-drawn sequence of Dalí-meets-Disney metamorphoses of spaces and objects, and the latter with a twelve-page epic, "The Hog Riding Fools," in which bikers meet the Checkered Demon, a mischievous magical being prone to extreme violence.

Reactions to the new issue were mixed. The Chicago-based cartoonist Jay Lynch, who knew Robert's work from the days of *Foo*, wrote to tell him he preferred the all-Robert issue, but as a friendly show of support, Lynch produced a Mr. Natural pin and plugged *Zap* 1 in the zine he was copublishing, *Chicago Mirror*. Robert wrote to thank Lynch, reported that he was working on some dirty comic books, and invited Lynch to send some work to *Zap*: "We'll kick 'em around th' ol' conference table 'n' see if they can make a touchdown. We intend to keep the quality of *Zap Comix* on a high level, so make it good stuff, you guys! We get a lot of diverse reactions to the different artist's [*sic*] stuff. A lot of people *hate* Wilson's stuff but it really keeps the Hells Angels element roaring with hilarity… some people like Griffin and Moscoso the best, while others, like yourself, still prefer the good ol' Crumb approach."

Back in New York pulling together Robert's Viking book, Bill Cole was among the readers who didn't care for "the other chaps," as he put it. He didn't want Robert muddying the waters just as he was about to introduce him to a mainstream publishing audience. In order to make the book a success, he needed a strong title and introduction, and an array of blurbs. After much back-and-forth, Robert convinced Cole and Viking to reluctantly use the title *Head Comix*. They'd hoped for "Crumb: His Book" or "Crumb's Comics," or "Too Much! The Crumb Comics," but Robert was firm: "I'd really like to use HEAD COMIX for the title. Believe me, I know what I'm doing. The kids who will buy millions of copies of my book will know what it means, and it doesn't necessarily pertain to acid… The term

‘Head’ now means mostly just being into your head… mind… head changes… besides, what I know of my fans all call my work ‘Head Comics.’” The *Realist*’s Paul Krassner came on board for the introduction, and the back cover would soon be festooned with blurbs from Milton Glaser and Allen Ginsberg, among others.

Robert’s enthusiastic offer to tone down or cut anything too raunchy came back to haunt him that summer. Viking was understandably nervous about the amount of cartoon sex within the book. Or, as Cole wrote: “Fucking you can have, and do have in a couple places, but the more elaborate forms of sexual activity I think we’d better stay away from for the present—no cunt lapping, cock sucking, ass licking or shit-eating, please. Now is that too much to ask?” Viking was still opening up, he explained. They’d started to publish for the counterculture with Leonard Cohen’s novel *Beautiful Losers*, but publishing dirty pictures was something else entirely. They weren’t sure how to even talk about it.

Caught between quite opposite sensibilities, Cole was also defining Robert to Thomas Henry Guinzburg, president of Viking, who objected to items far less glaring than cum. Cole wrote, “I’ve got to do what I think is best for my author—who is also my friend. He’s twenty-four, extremely sensitive, and this book is the biggest thing in his life […] I can certainly see why you and others think Crumb is a little hairy for Viking—but he’s obviously great, so obviously one of the geniuses of now, that any publisher should feel it his obligation to publish him.” Forgetting his promises less than a year before, Robert, with no experience in literary publishing and getting such adulation in San Francisco, was livid. They reached a compromise to remove some nudity and sex, but the sting was there and wouldn’t be forgotten. Through the summer they worked on the proofs and the covers. At times, communication broke off entirely. Robert was increasingly hard to keep track of. In July, Cole reported on a visit a friend made to see Robert at Clayton Street: “Friend knocked on the apartment door, man answered who said that he was Crumb. Entered apartment and four other guys in there, all zonked, all said that they were Crumb. Mrs. Crumb then enters and says that Crumb wasn't home."

That summer Robert was euphoric. He wrote to Mike Britt: "Getting stoned and drinking wine. Never thought I'd see th' day. But it's alright ma! I've made my fame… Everybody loves me for my work… now I've got to work on them loving me for myself… I'm going over to meet Janis Joplin tonight. Can't wait!" Joplin, whose voice had wafted into the Crumb's living room on Oak Street, had attended the University of Texas at Austin alongside Gilbert Shelton, and she liked the new underground comics. The Texas crew knew Robert both from the old *Help!* days and now through *Zap*. They got the two suddenly famous outsiders together. She and Robert hit it off—both uncomfortable with their sudden notoriety, insecure about their attractiveness, and practically neighbors in the Haight. She advised him to grow his hair out, maybe stop dressing like a guy out of *The Grapes of Wrath* and loosen up. One afternoon, Joplin met Robert at S. Clay Wilson's apartment in Bernal Heights and proposed he draw the cover for her band Big Brother and the Holding Company's upcoming record, *Cheap Thrills*. She brought along two female friends, Sunshine and Patticakes, announcing they would do anything Robert wished. He readily agreed to do the cover, though he never liked her band or the rock 'n' roll blaring at parties. He barely liked any American recordings after the year 1932, and both the strutting machismo of stars like Mick Jagger and earnest folkstylings of Bob Dylan struck him as middle-class posturing. It was Janis's earlier music that he enjoyed—around 1964, "when she sang old time country music and blues in small clubs. She was great then, a natural born country girl shouter and wailer in the old-time way."

The album art was due in a hurry, so Robert took some speed and stayed up all night, producing two finished drawings. The image he submitted for the cover was nixed—it featured photographs of the band members' heads atop little cartoon bodies playing their instruments. Instead, Robert's back cover art became the front cover: sixteen clever, detailed cartoon panels depicting songs, band members, and recording locations; when one song was dropped, the panel lettering was replaced with "Art: R. Crumb." Columbia Records slapped a photo on the back, paid Robert the then-enormous sum of $600 for the job, and never did return the artwork. Released in August, the record was an immediate hit, selling almost a million copies by the end of the year. "R. Crumb," unmistakably the same head and hand responsible for *Zap*, was now in bedrooms and living rooms around the country.

* * *

With a little extra cash in his pocket, in August 1968 Robert decided to head back to Chicago to meet Jay Lynch and check in on Marty and Sandra, and then go on to New York for the release of *Head Comix*. He boarded one of many buses carrying protesters or partiers to the Democratic National Convention. That trip he stayed with Jay and his wife, Jane (now Jane Wald). They were a handsome couple—Jane a sophisticated, coquettish brunette, and Jay, hair in a preppy cut, with a mischievous crinkle around his eyes. Neither of them knew how to keep house—dirty dishes piled up in the sink, and when that was full, they were stacked on the floor. But they were warm and zany. Robert took Jay and Jane along to see Sandra and Marty that August. They hit it off nicely. Jane, with her sharp, wry sense of humor, was drawn to Sandra's dark, sarcastic worldview. Marty and Sandra lived in a first-floor apartment by the

Howard El stop. It was decorated with enormous posters of Sandra's obsession, Marlon Brando, and groaning shelves of Marty's 78 collection. It, too, was notoriously messy. Jane Wald remembers that both he and Sandy were "very intelligent, cultured, and insightful. They had friends, but mostly kept to themselves. Sandy didn't go to concerts, meetings, activist stuff at all, though she had those sensibilities. Not a joiner. A lone wolf. She didn't disdain others, she wasn't morose, but she kept to herself. She only ever referred to her father as 'the old man.'"

Most of the time, though, was spent at the Lynch apartment. In photos from that week Robert is smiling, joking, and of course, with fellow comic book obsessive Lynch, rifling through stacks of EC comic books. Robert's hair is loose and wavy, just to his ears, and he looks happy, healthy, even somehow impervious to the political and social chaos in the city. In less than a year, he'd found a tribe of disparate artists around the country with whom he shared aesthetic roots as well as ambitions for the new comics. Jay Lynch had also gotten early exposure in *Help!*, just enough to continue submitting to humor magazines around the country, including the *Realist*. In the summer of 1968, the third issue of his and cartoonist Skip Williamson's magazine *Chicago Mirror* rolled off the presses to a deafening silence. There hadn't been much of an audience to speak of, and now, he remembered, their "perceived audience of local beatnik intellectuals was turning into a zoned-out flock of cosmic-conscious love babies." Lynch was by temperament and geography a connector. His fellow *Help!* alumnus Gilbert Shelton wrote to him about *Feds 'n' Heads* shortly after Lynch received *Zap*. That was all the encouragement he and Williamson needed. They scrapped the *Chicago Mirror* and focused on their own underground comic book: *Bijou Funnies*.

Robert stayed on the Lynches' couch and, together with Williamson and a fresh-out-of-high-school cartoonist named Jay

Kinney, drew and assembled *Bijou* number 1. While in town Robert also drew two covers for Kinney's fanzine, *Nope*. Like his older compatriots before him, Kinney was slowly working his way up from fan to professional. He remembered, "In those early days of the underground comix movement, there was no clear boundary between fannish art given out freely and commercial art for which one expected payment." While Lynch and Williamson were known in fan circles, Crumb's name alone brought it a lot more attention than it otherwise might have received. Lynch said, "Crumb travels around the country helping people start underground comix.… He's like a Johnny Appleseed." Robert felt charged and game to help get a movement going. After his difficulties with Viking, he resolutely wanted to stay independent. It was only two years since he'd practically begged for work, but now Robert was invited to the *Playboy* offices and treated like a visiting dignitary. He relished declining Michelle Altman's offer of a lucrative regular comic strip, telling her, "Tell Hefner he can take his offer and shove it."

The group took a break from assembling *Bijou* to check out the chaotic Democratic National Convention, at which protestors were greeted with tear gas, billy clubs, and National Guard jeeps garnished with concertina wire. Robert, Jay, and Jane went to see the action in Lincoln Park: "As we were walking toward the park this big crowd of kids was running toward us away from the park. And behind them was this army of cops firing tear gas. So we just turned around and ran." They'd strolled into a historically brutal show of force, police viciously attacking protestors and journalists broadcast live on national television. The trio returned the next day to survey the destruction. By then, "Allen Ginsberg was sitting on the ground, chanting and ringing his finger symbols and all that stuff, surrounded by Black kids staring at him wondering what the hell he was doing." Soon the disparate protest leaders were rounded up and charged with conspiracy to start a riot. The resulting trial was a blatant attempt by the city to suppress any dissent. In 1969, Robert drew a poster for the "Conspiracy Stomp" benefit event for the Chicago Eight featuring the likes of Paul Krassner and the cast of *Hair*, but otherwise stayed out of the fray: "I wasn't involved in that collective political passion back then. I'd go to those events or any kind of political event and just wind up looking at the girls."

But he did draw comics that could not help but be interpreted politically for no money at all. While he was in the city he drew *All Asshole Comics* for the *Chicago Seed*, a leftist underground paper that covered local police violence, the Black Panthers, and antiwar activism. The strip returns to the same muck as his contribution to *Zap* number 2 earlier that year: "Angelfood McSpade," a thorough examination of the large Black female who lives in "darkest Africa." In that comic, Robert visually enumerates her characteristics, her tongue, her thighs, and says, "There she is, ready, willing, and able, with plenty of what it takes just dying to give it away…" The story ends with a businessman character heading to Africa to "go get her." This is a dredging up of Robert and white America's most grotesque visions of the forever nubile Black giantess.

In "All Asshole Comics" his nasty "Melvin-Mole"-like character, the Snoid, holds an oar while sitting atop Angelfood McSpade and "rows" her downstream until her head hits a rock and they both sink. In the second strip, a Black character (drawn as a Sambo) heads to Chicago to get justice for his "people" and attacks the Snoid, who regenerates and makes him feel guilty for the violence. When the Black man relaxes, a legion of Snoids violently piles on. That the *Seed* published the strip at all says how wide open the discourse was, how blown-out the sensibilities. It was, in the minds of the mostly white and male counterculture, all-out revolution. No taboos, nothing held back. Even the *Cheap Thrills* record cover featured a cartoon "mammy" in one of the panels. If there was to be a cure for the country, it would be through all-out release, a splenetic venting, no Fredric Wertham–like treatment in sight. The counterculture of the sixties that nurtured underground comics was a mostly white and male scene, reflective of the overculture in general, which likely accounts for the curious lack of criticism of Robert's work and its racist depictions and themes at the time.

Robert has offered different explanations for his race play over the years. "Often I used the stereotype 'coon' image in my comics, in the sixties especially, to satirize the stereotype on one level, but also to convey an image of funkiness and spontaneity that had nothing to do with real black people. The cartoon 'niggers' stood for a purely abstract idea. They stood for what the stereotype itself meant to people, not what black people actually looked like to me. My fault was in not realizing that people would take these cartoon images literally."

The comics Robert read as a child, and the foundational comics in the canon, from *Little Nemo in Slumberland* to *The Spirit*, all employ Sambo characters. It is a trope of the comics medium. And moreover, Robert grew up in a racist household, in a racist country, and the things he was attracted to in commercial culture often trafficked in that imagery. The rendering of Black people as somehow other than human allows them to exist in nearly all comics until the late 1960s as merely foils for whites, to show white naivete, unfunkiness, or puffed-up-ness, as in Robert's "Whiteman" or his earlier "Head Comix/Hey Boparee Bop!" Black people have no autonomy. Women are not so different, and Angelfood McSpade crosses both and becomes the ultimate primal sex object, sweatily rendered with his crow quill. She is also a stand-in for every white vision of Black women (think of the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar" and the marketing of Tina Turner as "primal") and ultimately, for Robert, a capacious symbol of everything white American culture does to Black people—*You want fame and fortune, then come here, right into abject degradation*.

As he wrote, Robert knew that both his and the cultural symbols were not meant to be taken as realistic presentations of Black life, but it was also his privilege not to have to be burdened by their effects. This was what Fredric Wertham may have been correct about back in 1954's *Seduction of the Innocent*: If the only Black people that whites encounter are grotesque fantasies, how could they not become racist? And likewise, what is the effect on a people whose only representation in popular culture is degrading? As his brother Charles wrote to him about "Whiteman," Robert was not answering the question but rather displaying the symptoms.

The critic Gerald Early has framed the comic book as "the moral text of our social and political disorder [...] where we will find, in its pages, what we are, what we think we are, and what we are afraid to see." On Robert, he writes: "He might be dramatizing his own racism in some way, his own racial fantasies, or collective white fantasies." Essentially it's both racist and excoriating. Robert indicts himself, the reader, and the entire culture. He can't help but tempt fate in order to prove a point. No happy endings or pat lessons in Crumb Land.

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CHAPTER 10

Hail, Hail

In the aftermath of Chicago, that fall of 1968, the country descended into a hurricane of conflict. Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King had been assassinated. Richard Nixon looked likely to win the presidency. Police, emboldened by city officials and conservative leadership, arrested or beat anyone with the slightest whiff of patchouli about them. Even an anodyne be-in in Central Park that fall was broken up by cops assaulting stoned attendees. The Vietnam War continued. All the norms had been swept away—monogamy, sobriety, fiscal and social responsibility. Confusion, not peace and love, was the prevailing mood.

The underground press, and the white counterculture in general, shattered into different factions. A few currents from the old college-campus-driven leftist movements emerged: Some felt that the only response was violent political revolution; another faction urged the transmitting of Marxist ideas to the actual working class so that they could effect change together. And still others chose a path of inward reflection, moving to communes and following spiritual leaders. Other fronts were opening, too: In September 1968, in Atlantic City, two hundred members of the group New York Radical Women protested the Miss America pageant, calling it "the Degrading Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol." The Black Panther Party, now a nationally unified organization, had grown to its largest numbers and called for its members to fight back, and use weapons as needed.

Robert's October 4, 1968, cover of *EVO* captured the feeling: against a horizon of tenements, a woman asks, "Can the mind know it?" and an old hipster, a lit fuse hanging from his pocket, responds, "I dunno." It offers, at newspaper size, Robert's clearest expression of the mood of the counterculture: profound and ever-darkening uncertainty. That cover announced Robert's return to the city to promote *Head Comix*, which Viking released on October 7, 1968—ten thousand copies in softcover and hardcover with the promised blurbs on the back cover and Paul Krassner introducing the book up front.

Just two years earlier he was an anonymous acid head. Now his album cover art was propped against throbbing speakers everywhere and Allen Ginsberg deemed him "so far supreme funny underground comicstrip incarnation of the posthistoric flower age." *Head Comix* put Robert in front of a mainstream audience who would never think to pick up an underground newspaper. As the publisher's advertisements promised, "R. Crumb is alive and stoned at your local bookstore." *Head Comix* was anomalous both as the first mainstream release from an underground cartoonist as well as in its form: a book of short comics. Most volumes of comics collected single-panel cartoons, or, as in the case of Jules Feiffer, thematically linked short stories. But editor Bill Cole treated Robert's work as he might a book of short prose stories, assigning the book a table of contents and varying the length and visual density of the selections so that the neophyte reader wouldn't be overwhelmed.

New York magazine devoted two pages to the book, with critic John Canaday praising it: "The art of R. Crumb is at once raw and sophisticated, impulsive and perceptive, sociologically acute and philosophically disruptive. What is significant and what is trivial seem interchangeable here, and I hope that R. Crumb, whoever he is, never bothers about which is which." Canaday wisely bracketed

Robert against Pop Art. While revolutionary within the history of western painting for its efforts to hold up a mirror to American consumerism, the formally ambitious and aesthetically polite veneer of Andy Warhol's and Roy Lichtenstein's art operated in a different world than Robert's. His brutal imagery, funny language, and piercing insights in a cheap, easy-to-read, and widely available format refused assimilation into polite society.

Robert saw his editor Bill Cole just once in Manhattan, spending time instead within the two centers of the New York underground publishing scene: poet and Fug Ed Sanders's Lower East Side bookstore, Peace Eye (now with a sign designed and painted by cartoonist Spain Rodriguez), and the cramped and bustling *EVO* offices, now in a loft on Second Avenue above the premier rock venue in the city, the Fillmore East. Staffers practically vibrated from the sonics of Jimi Hendrix or the Who warming up downstairs.

At the *EVO* office, Robert was glad to meet Spain, who was then the occasional art director of the newspaper in addition to contributing ambitious and sexy Marxist comics with a cinematic sense of space and scale. Spain, streetwise, funny, and always on the lookout for an urban detail, brought Robert back to the fifth-floor tenement apartment he shared with *EVO* cartoonist Kim Deitch on East Eighth Street. The apartment next door was inhabited by squatting speed freaks who knocked a hole in the wall to "share" the cartoonists' provisions. If they patched it up, the hole appeared again. Kim Deitch, a bit twitchy from the neighborly action, not to mention a recent plague of muggings, carried a pistol with him on his evening strolls. He was startled by Robert's sudden appearance. Here was the guy whose "Life Among the Constipated" had precipitated his crisis of artistic faith a year back. He remembered, "Spain came in and Crumb was with him! I was so startled that I could barely speak, but did manage to stammer out something about how much I loved his work. Crumb turned out to be an all-around good fellow, decidedly upbeat in those days. He was traveling with a small ukulele-sized banjo at the time, and he'd occasionally grab it up and start singing a snatch of some old popular song at the drop of a hat. He was clean-shaven and even had longish hair. It was as close as he ever came to looking like a hippie. He crashed with us for a couple of days, and he had one of his perennial sketchbooks with him. It was a treasure trove of spontaneous, brilliant, entertaining art."

Spain, Deitch, and their friend Fugs drummer Ken Weaver, already a fan from *Yarrowstalks* and a *Mad* obsessive from way back, were determined to show Robert a good time in their distinctly grimy corner of the universe. Weaver asked what Robert wanted to do while he was in town. The answer: "I want a big woman to carry me around." And, indeed, a fellow cartoonist introduced him to a young scenester for a three-week affair. Weaver was as amazed by this declaration as he was by Robert's ability to just sit down and draw in any given circumstance, no matter the chaos around him.

Robert remained in New York until November 8, so he could attend the opening of *Ape Rape: An Exhibition of Lower East Side Comic Art* at Peace Eye. The gallery of local talent was hung salon style in the low-ceilinged storefront. It featured Bill Beckman, Kim Deitch, Spain, Art Spiegelman, and fifty drawings fresh out of Robert's sketchbook, as well as some recent comic strips; prices ranged from $75 to $275 each. Sanders seamlessly integrated the new underground comics with his poetry zines and small-press books, selling copies of Jay Lynch's *Bijou* 1 faster than Lynch could send them, blowing out *Head Comix*, and making noises about publishing a Crumb sketchbook. *EVO* cartoonist Vaughn Bodē raved that he'd observed Robert up in the offices drawing comic strips directly in ink without any penciling. Though Robert still occasionally did just that, now he usually lightly penciled his pages, erasing the marks after he completed the strip in ink. Robert's work showed no evidence of mistakes or corrections—on the rare occasion that he needed to make a fix in those days he would scrape the errant lines off the hard Strathmore paper he favored. The appearance to viewers at Peace Eye was of an invisible process—straight from his head to the page. The image itself was the sole evidence of his hand on the page. This astounded viewers, who sometimes mistook an original drawing for a print.

* * *

Having completed his hops to cartoon hubs, Robert landed back in San Francisco. He hand-delivered *Bijou* 1 to the San Francisco Comic Book Company, perhaps the first dedicated comic book store in the country, whose eccentric proprietor, Gary Arlington (motto: “I am not of this planet”), opened the store in the Mission District about eight weeks after the first *Zap*. Arlington, then twenty-nine, was a dedicated EC comics fan and among the first mail order buyers of *Foo*. His early fandom fueled a passion for selling and occasionally publishing underground comics. As word spread that there was a place to look at the latest undergrounds and leaf through old rarities, the store became a meeting spot for cartoonists. For Gilbert Shelton, it was the first place he stopped upon arriving in San Francisco—he traded a box of his just-published *Feds ’n’ Heads* to Arlington for a 1959 Chevrolet.

Slowly but surely, the San Francisco Comic Book Company was filling up with titles that took permission, if not influence, from *Zap*. It was as though the energy of the counterculture was shifting containers, and suddenly the underground comic book, which Robert had only dreamed up a year before, was a site for visual experimentation. In a long profile in *Rolling Stone*, Robert attempted to explain what was happening: “The underground phenomenon is a weird, parallel thing of my generation now coming to the surface. When I started putting out the comic strips, people popped up all over. We're trying to reproduce the things that turned us on when we were kids. I grew up reading comic books and watching television. It's all I know. The artists of any time use what's available. A certain segment always tries to maintain traditional forms—keep painting alive because painting is great. Bullshit. What appeals to me about comics? It's hard to pin down. The whole thing, the whole media. Just about anything done in it is interesting. People still think of comic books as being for kids—books with words are for grownups, books with pictures are for children. It's the whole [Marshall] McLuhan thing—breaking out of linear ways of thinking. Partly, it's a nostalgia thing. Comics are an American folk art form. The way to turn people's heads is to take a medium they're familiar with and then do something new in the old medium. Hippie artists have a tendency to try to be exotic; rather than embracing the whole thing they came out of, they reject it. It turns me on to absorb the whole culture we came out of—comic strips, advertisements, bottle caps."

Robert believed in the working-class culture from which he came, believed art needed to be accessible to everyone. With just a nod to Marshall McLuhan, he demolishes the idea of a high-low divide, insisting that the comics medium is simply a part of the cultural stream. Robert knew that his work was, in a sense, a logical evolution of what Barks and Kurtzman had started: comics as both form and container for any kind of content.

The only writers who immediately understood the historical and critical scope of Robert's ideas were among the old gang from his fandom days. Comic book and animation historian Michael Barrier had been following Robert's work since *Foo.* Now he picked up the thread in the November 1968 issue of his fanzine *Funnyworld* with a lengthy essay on *Head Comix* and the recent Fritz stories published in *Cavalier.* Barrier was the first critic, and remains one of the only writers, to succinctly explain two factors that made Robert's comics function: First, that Robert's was not a cinematic approach, as in the popular superhero comic books of the day. "Crumb's 'camera' remains at the same distance from his characters throughout a scene, and even the panels remain the same size throughout." And second, that Robert departed "from the geist of the old 'funny animal' comics. Crumb has his cat and his other characters saying things and doing things and feeling emotions that have always been alien to 'funny animals.'"

This lengthy review also contains the first deep dive into Robert's biography, amply quoting from Marty as well as fellow critic John Benson, noting Charles's and Sandra's comics, the history of *Foo*, and Robert's time in Cleveland. "Not only can he draw, but he's a master storyteller, one who can break from the traditional ways without indulging in any juvenile braggadocio. He's made an omelet without breaking any eggs. There's never a hint of strain in his strips, never any indication that he doesn't feel quite right using this word or having his characters behave this way, no matter how outrageous those words or that behavior might be." And while Barrier had reservations about the sex and toilet humor, he was one of just a few precision-minded critics who understood both the tradition and Robert's advances.

The sex and the toilet humor were the primary subjects of a new comic book, *Snatch*, released earlier that autumn of 1968. Hatched by Robert and S. Clay Wilson, it was modeled on digest-sized comic books for servicemen in the 1940s featuring racy prose and scantily clad cartoon ladies in compromising positions, as well as the Depression-era "Tijuana bibles"—eight-page pornographic comics starring popular comic strip and cinema stars of the day. Many of these Mafia-supported publications were drawn by Wesley Morse, who later, as a Topps employee alongside Woody Gelman, drew that beloved icon of all-American fun, Bazooka Joe. Morse's career is one version of Robert's America: look underneath any wholesome icon and you'll find moral degradation. *Snatch* fulfills its mandate: Robert contributed the various single-page drawings, like "Jail Bait of the Month, featuring Honey Bunch Kaminski, age 13," and sex strips including "The Adventures of Andy Hard-On," while Wilson contributed the one-page comic "Pussy" and various depraved images. Cartoon women are humiliated and demeaned in a myriad of scenarios. *Snatch* is a winking send-up of hard-core pornography but is also, in content and spirit, virulently misogynistic. "*Snatch* isn't regular pornography," Robert explained. "It comes at it from another angle. It's a satire on itself, it makes fun of pornography. *Snatch* takes off from pocket sex books. They never really have anything about sex in them. When I got hipped to these things, I realized it was a medium no one's really tapped."

Snatch published into the moment that pornography briefly became, for some, a hip offshoot of the sexual revolution. The introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 meant that women could have sex without depending on anyone else to avoid pregnancy, and in 1963 Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* advocated for women to actively enjoy sex and to move away from their prescribed roles. Gradually sexual liberation became a part of the counterculture. Having sex was expected of men and women alike as a demonstration that neither was hung up on the values of the square society. But unlike the men, the women of the 1960s were still expected to maintain their traditional housebound roles. The more women pushed, especially the radical feminist critique of the material and societal structures that kept women second-class citizens, the more there was pushback by the men around them, who feared that their wives and girlfriends were going to kill the fun. Rather like the Detroit revolutionary group the White Panthers' slogan, "Fuck your woman so hard till she can't stand up," the underground boys were only leftist until it impacted their ability to "score" with women.

Selling sex was long a part of the underground and alternative culture. More or less discreet classified ads for nude models, romances, and massage parlors had supported the *Village Voice* and *EVO* for years. The success of *Playboy* as a magazine and lifestyle brand complete with clubs and a television show opened the door to an increased tolerance, and appetite, for sexual material. *Playboy* brought together, and maybe conflated, sexual liberation with neoliberalism and intellectual status, burnished by interviews with the likes of Malcolm X and Saul Bellow, and short fiction from Joyce Carol Oates and Vladimir Nabokov.

In 1964, the Supreme Court overturned the obscenity ruling banning Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* from the United States, and most crucially, in 1966 it overturned a Massachusetts judgment that the book *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* by John Cleland was obscene. When issuing its ruling, the court clarified the earlier standard for obscenity: that an obscene work be "utterly without redeeming social value." The court clarified and expanded this protection, noting that the "social value" could not be defined by what the court finds prurient or offensive. This created a much wider protection for the arts, as the burden of proving something objectively offensive would take enormous effort by any would-be prosecutor. Despite this new standard, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, police visits to bookstores and head shops were common. Looking for such potentially illicit material was often a pretense for keeping a street or a neighborhood free of "undesirables" like hippies or pornographers, or writing a ticket that was easier to pay than contest in court.

In addition to the upscale *Playboy*, there were plenty of men's magazines with pinups, like *Cavalier*, as well as grimy tabloids, including *Candid Press*, which now employed Marty Pahls. It was one of a few tabloids and porn magazines published by Allied News Co., a sleaze merchant dating back to the 1940s, and was written by Chicago writers moonlighting from their lives as poets and novelists. In 1969, Marty, as "Claude Chadwick," had interviewed Robert for the company's *National Insider*. Marty hired cartoonist Jay Lynch and his wife, Jane, to write for the magazine and serialized his own sex novel about the erotic adventures of a CIA agent, illustrated with sketchbook drawings by Robert. With a circulation of one hundred thousand copies, *Candid Press* stood out even in its own outrageous category for its enthusiastic absurdities; the May 1972 *Candid Press EXTRA* boasts: "Dazzling array of perversions! Spanking/Rape/Nymphos/Morphos/Black-White Sex/Pimps/Torture/Fetishes/Nudists."

And yet until November of 1968 there wasn't a publication exclusively devoted to the down-and-dirty particulars of intercourse until Al Goldstein's *Screw* made its debut as, in his words, "the best in the field we created." *Playboy* had pinups; *Screw* had hardcore photographs alongside surprisingly well-written and funny (and perhaps socially valuable) reviews of sex toys, porn movies, smut books, massage parlors, and every other element of sex imaginable. It was a cheap tabloid without pretensions, and by the end of the decade it was selling over 100,000 copies weekly—tens of thousands more than *EVO* and coming close to the *Village Voice*'s 125,000 copies.

Snatch was the first comic book entry into this burgeoning market. As consolation for moving *Zap* from Don Donahue's Apex Novelties to Print Mint, Robert asked Donahue to print and publish the eight-hundred-copy run of *Snatch*, which was, once again, assembled at Dana and Robert's kitchen table by an assortment of friends. They folded and stapled the printer's sheets, then used letter openers and kitchen knives to cut open the pages. *Snatch* quickly sold out, including one copy to an undercover police officer.

“I sold 350 copies of *Snatch* in three days,” bookseller Moe Moskowitz said, “and I don’t see any mad rapists running around here.” The comic books caricature sex, he said, “but they’re clean stuff. No leather stockings, or whips.” Regardless, on November 14, 1968, the police arrested Moskowitz and confiscated forty-seven copies of *Snatch* and seventy-four copies of *Zap* 2, among other items. Moskowitz was quickly released on $500 bail.

In 1969, Si Lowinsky, the former Print Mint employee and now owner of the Phoenix Gallery in Berkeley, was busted for selling *Snatch* 1 and 2 at an exhibition called *The New Comix*, which displayed some two hundred pages by twenty-five cartoonists. Rather than pay a fine, as Moskowitz did, Lowinsky opted for a trial to determine if indeed he was selling obscene material with no socially redeeming value. His lawyer shrewdly called Peter Selz, then the director of the University Art Museum at the University of California, Berkeley, as the star witness. When handed an examination copy of *Snatch* 1, Selz “smiled and replied, ‘I have my own,’ and took one from his pocket. ‘It appeals to my sense of humor.’” He went on to defend its artistic merit: “It’s a very funny piece of art… These things don’t happen on the street. It’s so extreme it’s absurd. That’s why it’s funny.” The jury found Lowinsky not guilty and underground smut was safe again for a while.

Snatch opened a path Robert followed for decades, and over the years he’s tried to reckon with it. Spurred by both the evolving culture of sex and the electric sexual grotesques of S. Clay Wilson he’d encountered in February, Robert was publishing his most depraved fantasies in *Snatch* and elsewhere. It was less than a year since his cheerily absurd comics had won over an audience of stoners and squares alike. Now, ever the contrarian, in *Snatch* he implicitly asked, “Will you still like me if…?” He had made pornographic drawings since he was seventeen, but he used to destroy them. Now he had permission to publish what he’d once flushed down the toilet. And once the id was out on the page, Robert could never stuff it back in the inkwell—“it *likes* being out there, it enjoys immensely wallowing in my cross-hatching. Sure my ‘higher’ self thinks it’s repugnant, ugly, anti-social, self-absorbed, odious… I’m a divided self… the light R. Crumb and the dark R. Crumb… they wrestle around… it’s all in the comics.”

Robert discussed his misogyny with *EVO*’s D. A. Latimer in 1970, who led with a question referring to grade-school antagonism between young boys and girls:

DA: What seven-year-old boy isn’t hostile toward women?
RC: Yeah, but when you’re twenty-five you should know better.
DA: Yeah, but when you’re twenty-five and you can re-create the sensibilities of a seven-year-old, that’s really something.
RC: Who’s re-creating?
DA: You mean that’s the way you feel toward women?
RC: Well, sometimes.

Robert always brings the work back to himself, as a martyr. By the early 1970s he began talking about facing an imaginary tribunal of moral judges. Despite a “shrill voice in [his] head screaming ‘What are you doing? This is crazy! This is stupid! This is anti-social!’” he continued. Here he was again, perversely tempting fate by publishing his most debased fantasies. But if stepping in front of a wall to take a rock to his teeth showed kids the danger of their games, what is the function of *Snatch*? A bitter cocktail of sex drive, adolescent rejection, self-pity, and overwhelming artistic ego, it offers the ugliest vision of white male heterosexuality. Some readers no doubt related to it. He’s heard from many readers—all males—that his comics made them feel that they were not alone in their own sexual predilections. Others could read it as a flashing red light about the dangers of male sexual aggression. And still others could see in it the absurdity and dark humor of taking the idiom of pornography—a bastion of fantasy for freaks and squares alike—and turning even *that* inside out. He was ruining the wet dream with grotesque nightmares.

In November 1968, while Moe Moskowitz was briefly locked up for selling *Snatch*, Viking, feeling confident about its 5,000-copy third printing of *Head Comix* (bringing the total count to 19,500), contracted Robert for a *Fritz the Cat* book collection, paying a $2,500 advance to include a new fifteen-page story due in just over a month, despite the fact that Robert didn't want to do any more Fritz stories. He was also preparing to release *Zap* number 3 that December. The third issue included yet more artists, though Moscoso and Wilson didn't want too many additional contributors diluting the quality or the royalty checks. *Zap* was a democracy that required unanimous agreement, though there was a tacit understanding that Robert, who saw *Zap* as more culturally omnivorous than his collaborators did, was first among equals. Nevertheless Lynch didn't make the cut, and neither did Rory Hayes, who worked the counter at the San Francisco Comic Book Company and drew guttural, unpretentious horror comics. To Robert, Hayes demonstrated the elasticity of underground comics. Others just thought it was incoherent junk. James Osborne, a noir-grotesque cartoonist much beloved by his peers, likewise didn't see print. Robert invited in Emory Douglas, the minister of culture for the Black Panthers, whose newspaper and poster graphics defined the visual identity of the movement, but he declined. As did Peter Saul, a painter of Day-Glo cartoon-epic images of American corruption and violence. Robert succeeded in bringing on perhaps the best storytellers of the time: Gilbert Shelton and Spain Rodriguez. They added a narrative balance back to *Zap*, and because both were temperamentally even-keeled, dedicated cartoonists, they brought a grounded and productive sensibility to the group. They also joined the traditional jam sessions for most issues—single- or double-page collaborative comic strips drawn by all the artists in a session or two.

Released alongside the third issue was *Zap* 0 (so numbered, at Moscoso's suggestion, to avoid disrupting the title's flow into a multiartist anthology), which contained what was originally supposed to be *Zap* 1, drawn in October 1967 and sent to *Yarrowstalks*' Brian Zahn for publication. Having been unable to get ahold of Zahn all year, Robert presumed the art was lost in Philadelphia (where it would stay until Zahn returned it to Robert in 1975), but he found the set of photocopies he'd sent to Bill Cole for *Head Comix*. Robert retouched the pages, filling in the blacks a photocopier couldn't reproduce, and added a new cover, without the "bobbing cock" on the original. *Zap* 0 and 3, drawn just a year apart, were released to brisk sales in December 1968. The Print Mint's Don Schenker reported that Moe's Books sold fifty copies a day of *Zap* comics for a two-month period, while San Francisco's City Lights Booksellers was selling seventy-five copies a day of various underground comics, *Zap* among them. Head shops could order posters, beads, and comic books all in one shot from the Print Mint. Comic book fans could mail-order direct from Gary Arlington's San Francisco Comic Book Company; some found their way to Don Donahue's doorstep, and some, like collector and artist Al Davoren, simply knocked on Robert's Clayton Street door and bought a pile. It was still a small scene, a couple of years away from the real glut.

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CHAPTER 11

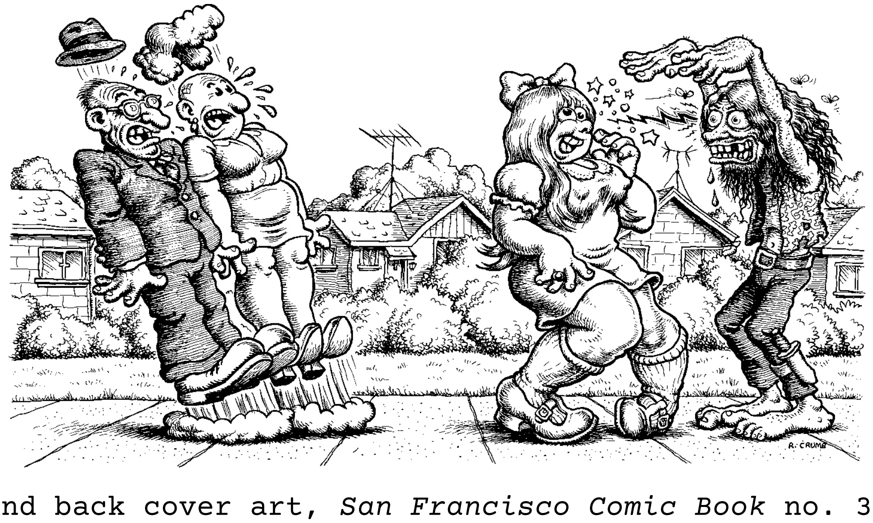
On the Run

In early 1969, Robert spent his days away from Clayton Street, up at his *Zap* collaborator S. Clay Wilson's place in Bernal Heights, smoking weed and drinking Mountain Red wine—cheap stuff sold in an old-timey jug with a ring handle. The poet Michael McClure dropped in once, bringing the Doors' lead singer, Jim Morrison (an aspiring cartoonist himself). They feasted on crackers and sardines. Morrison loved Crumb's work, saying, "Crumb is, I think, one of the most original and brilliant geniuses to come around in a long time. Ever since I've been reading *Zap*, I see the world as a *Zap* comix. I can't help it. It's altered my viewpoint. It's actually a horrible surreal comic. It's a nasty vision of existence." As Morrison got progressively drunker, Wilson and McClure began making fun of him, imitating his deep voice, intoning, to the puzzled singer, "Heeeey, gotttta ssssigarette?" The cartoonists, almost militantly unpretentious, were unimpressed with entertainers and pretty much anyone else outside of their newfound brotherhood. Other celebrities came calling: Robert dodged actress Jane Fonda and the film director Roger Vadim—they had just had a hit with the comic book adaptation *Barbarella* and were looking to make a film with Robert next. He simply dodged their calls until they got the message.

And while the big time had found the counterculture, what wasn't absorbed began to wither away. The once-local bands like Janis Joplin's Big Brother and the Holding Company, Jefferson Airplane, and the Grateful Dead, now all on major labels, were out on tour rather than playing the park or the local venues every week. Without those weekly gigs there was no need for frequent posters, causing that business, along with a bunch of the local venues, to crater. Many of the poster artists turned to album covers, and, of course, comics, which were the perfect portable and immersive entertainment for dope smokers everywhere.

The center of the hippie moment, Haight-Ashbury, was also suffering. Just as the community for weekly rock shows was disappearing, so was the small-town feel of the Haight. Tourists, would-be gurus like Charles Manson, drug dealers, and merchandisers clotted the sidewalks. Out on the street, Robert ran into a young woman from Oklahoma whom Eric Preisler had brought to Clayton Street just six months before. She'd just arrived at the time, wide-eyed and innocent, declaring, "If mah parents could see me nayow!" Here she was in a micro-miniskirt, stockings, and high heels, shivering on the corner. She looked warily from Robert to her pimp and back again. Many of the rockers, and anyone else who'd made money in the previous few years, moved north, out of the city, to the verdant hills of Marin County for quiet and privacy. Without its locals and its hubs, the Haight grew cold. As one writer put it: "It is said that house cats did not dare to talk on the street that year; they hid behind bushes because needle freaks,—speeders and junkies—were hunting them for food. Haight Street was unpleasant and dangerous by noontime." Robert dramatized the fear shortly after the August 1969 Manson murders. For the cover of Gary Arlington's 1970 anthology, *San Francisco Comic Book* issue 3, he summoned up a vicious-looking hippie hypnotizing a young girl in white knee socks, her parents, on the back cover, literally scared right out of their skulls. In Robert's ostensibly friendly cartooning style the image reads like a tour poster gone horribly wrong. "Manson," Robert later wrote, was "exceptionally malevolent, but there were, in fact, a lot of older guys like him who draped themselves in the hippy trappings and prowled the 'scene' using psychedelic drugs, combined with their skills as charmers and hustlers, to form cults of devoted disciples and love slaves around themselves. I witnessed this over and over again in those years."

Robert and Dana were still hanging on to Clayton Street, though they, too, were fantasizing about buying some land up north to get out of the limelight. Robert was recognized out on the Haight, which both flattered his ego and enraged him. Now he was noticed? Just because he was famous? "I went from being lonely and ignored, basically a shadow person in this world, to someone of renown that too many people wanted a piece of, pulled and pushed constantly in all directions… For years, after the first flush of fame, I spent half my waking hours busting my ass to keep them all happy, all the people who wanted things from me, who roped me into their schemes and dreams… it was endless—an endless line of people wanting something from me." Sometimes the offers served his ego, and he went with it because it felt good. Sometimes he thought these people were his friends, only to be disappointed by their own agendas; sometimes he followed his libido and asked questions later; sometimes he went along because even if he didn't care about money, he had to earn—Dana and Jesse needed food and housing.



Front and back cover art, *San Francisco Comic Book* no. 3, 1970.

As Dana wrote to Jane Lynch, “Robert’s really working a lot and seems to be getting his head together somewhere. He loves Jesse and gets a very proud look about him when the little beast toddles into a room—drooling all the way. Jesse is always ripping Robert off for his pens—another sensitive young artist in the making.” Robert asked his lawyer, Michael Stepanian, to make sure Dana received his checks and gave her power of attorney so she could cash them, sign contracts, and generally handle the business of “America’s Best-Loved Underground Cartoonist.” Stepanian affectionately remembers Robert as “a genius, and a nice guy! But no head for business.” So he vetted the contracts and, when possible, kept the money flowing to Dana and Jesse. Whatever they needed, he made sure they got it. Robert and Dana were coming to an agreement that they needed to have an open marriage. He was enjoying the numerous women suddenly available to a new darling of the underground, and his feelings for Dana had grown complicated. He was still attracted to her, especially when she dressed up in saddle shoes and bobby sox for him, but his feelings for her, he said, “fluctuate[d] between deep hatred and supreme love. And all the variations in between. But [he was] never indifferent. It [was] heavy.” Dana, who took to facetiously referring to Robert as a “sensitive young genius,” deeply resented his philandering and this arrangement, but her choices were limited: either stay with Robert in some form or it was back to Cleveland as a single mother. She embraced the hippie archetype of the Wife/Earth Mother, at once a host happily providing for the assorted guests who might drop by to see her and Robert, and simultaneously attending to the business of “R. Crumb.”

Among the guests Dana actually enjoyed was Shelly Rosen, a medical student and old friend of Jeff Kessler and Eric Preisler from Cleveland. He endeared himself to the Crumbs by diagnosing a sinus infection that had been nagging Dana for over a month; joining the young family for dinner a couple of times a week, providing grounded conversation, a familiar tie to their more stable past; and playing the fiddle along with Robert's ukulele. The spring of 1969 Rosen had to return home to face the draft board, so Robert readily agreed to be his road companion. Dana at first seemed accommodating, fixing a going-away lunch of fried chicken, potato salad, and chocolate chip cookies for the guys. Just as they were approaching the on-ramp to the 101, they heard an inauspicious grinding noise and instead swerved slowly into a filling station. The attendant took a look under the hood and announced that Rosen's tank was filled with sugar. Dana, angry that Robert was leaving after being home less than six months, no matter who he was with, had sabotaged the car. No matter. Sixty bucks later the car was fixed, and they were on the road, first to Springfield, Missouri, for a brief interlude with the family of a girlfriend of Rosen's, then on to Chicago, where they stayed with Marty and Sandra, whose relationship was coming apart. Depressed and isolated in that apartment in Chicago, Sandra drank too much and seduced men on the couch while Marty wrote for *Candid Press*. Dinner with the unhappy couple included Rosen fending off Sandra's advances under the kitchen table.

Eventually Rosen dropped Robert in the other midwestern countercultural hub, Detroit, where he stayed about six weeks, visiting and sleeping with a few different women. Home to a vibrant music and art scene, the city and its nearby college town, Ann Arbor, were natural grounds for Robert to drift in. A young underground cartoonist and poster artist named Carl Lundgren looked after him a bit, offering him weed and convincing him to draw a strip for Lundgren's comic book *Tales from the Ozone*, thus placing the area on the underground comics map, as he had for Chicago. For fifty dollars cash he was also convinced to draw the cover for the second issue of the fledgling rock magazine *Creem*, which would soon position itself as the gritty, irreverent alternative to *Rolling Stone*. Robert's mascot design, a bottle exclaiming "Boy Howdy!," became the enduring icon of the magazine.

Staying in a hippie house in the city, he began working on his next solo comic book, *Motor City Comics*. Each comic book began with the cover and the title, often pulled from sketchbook phrases or designs, and the interior pages would flow from there. "I want to see good comic books come out," he said. "Just like when I was a little kid, every month a new Walt Disney comic came out. As long as they kept coming out every month and were good, I was happy. That's just the way I feel now. It's like some kind of obsession with comic books or something." He intended the comic books to each be complete dispatches from his mind, and they remain the best way to understand the scope of his work at the time, as it was intended to be consumed. He was filling the newsstand in his mind—there would be no single Robert Crumb title, nothing on which you could peg him; instead he hopscotched between publishers and concepts.

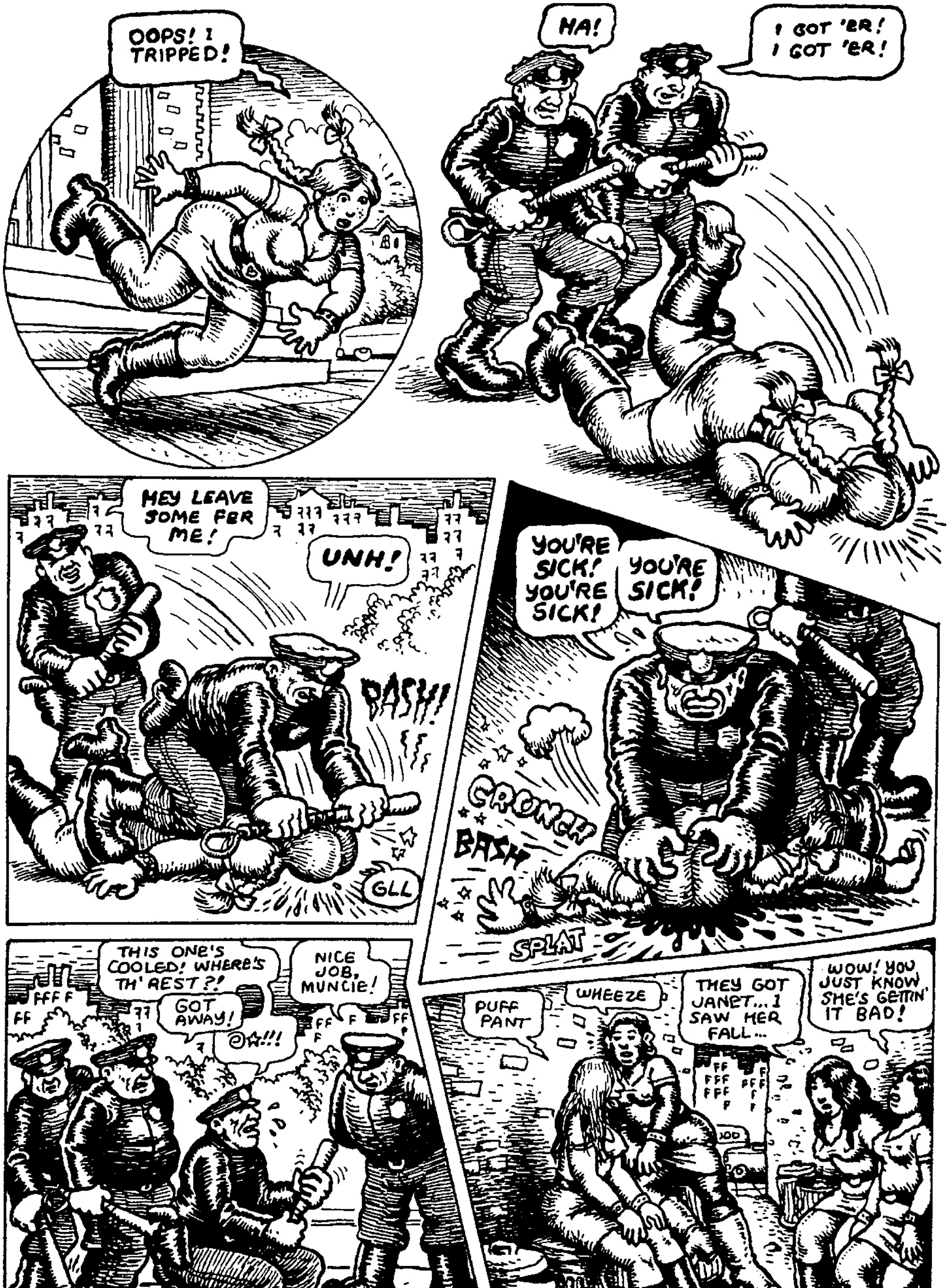
In *Motor City Comics* he put a new spin on his old *Help!* Sketchbook Reports with "Why Oh Why Oh Why the Hell Am I in Motor City"—a lament for the screwed working class of the city in the face of mechanization—and "Hi-Lites of Detroit," including the Woodward Avenue bus and the General Motors Building. The comic book also includes "Lenore Goldberg and her Girl Commandos," the closest he ever came to an action-hero story, drawn with the verve of a Carl Barks adventure, about a group of feminist revolutionaries who capture corporate stooges, reeducate them, and face extreme police brutality. It was Robert's first direct commentary on the radical movements all around him. He was appalled by the violence of law enforcement: back in early 1968, Robert witnessed the police breaking up a spontaneous street party in the Haight, catching sight of a cop on top of a girl smashing her face into the dirt while yelling, "You're sick, you're sick!" It struck him as a sort of cat-and-mouse game between the hippies and the cops. And so, when Lenore Goldberg relaxes at home, her scruffy boyfriend goes down on her, and she returns the favor in the final panel of the story. The story ends as he orgasms, shouting "Viva La Revolucion!" Any message Robert might've been conveying is undercut by that final blow job. Robert would never be a "movement" cartoonist—his subconscious refused the proposition.

As with his race play, Robert is at once indulging his fantasy of strong women who also submit and satirizing the reactionary sexual politics of many would-be revolutionaries, such as the White Panthers. The back cover is, likewise, as on most of his comic books of the time, a parodic advertisement—"Workers of the World Arise! Cast off your chains and read Motor City Comics." He's skewering the pretenses of youth revolution and the language of comic books using the blaring language of midcentury magazine covers, promising to expose worker exploitation and class struggle. He equally believed that yes, maybe, just maybe, this new kind of comic book could bring people forward, and he knew just as well that such a thought was absurd. Another shrug and a laugh.

* * *

Robert returned to San Francisco in mid-May 1969, just long enough for he and Dana to formally decide they needed an open marriage. They would mostly live together and do their best to remain friends. Jesse, then just a year old, would never remember his parents in a loving relationship. Dana moved to a new apartment on Diamond Street in a neighborhood called Diamond Heights and took up with a benevolent hippie schoolteacher named Paul Cohen.

Robert, seeking refuge from his fans, his child, and his wife, moved about a mile away to the Mira Monte Hotel at Twenty-Fifth and Mission. He paid twelve dollars a week for a little room with a toilet and bath down the hall. For a few weeks that summer he lived at Gilbert Shelton's apartment in Venice Beach, nicknamed the "Kanal Kooth Klub," where Shelton was working for the hot rod comics magazine *Drag Cartoons*, contributing strips to the *Los Angeles Free Press*, and drawing with his old Texas pal and Wonder Warthog collaborator Tony Bell, who was the art director for a new bar opening in Santa Monica called the Oar House. Crumb, Shelton, and Bell drew menus and advertisements; later they joined Spain, S. Clay Wilson, Kim Deitch, and a new collaborator, Robert Williams, for a few hazy days painting the interior of the joint with a wild array of their images.


OOPS! I TRIPPED!
HA!
I GOT 'ER! I GOT 'ER!
HEY LEAVE SOME FER ME!
UNH!
BASH!
GLL
YOU'RE SICK! YOU'RE SICK!
YOU'RE SICK!
CRUNCH
BASH
SPLAT
THIS ONE'S COOLED! WHERE'S TH' REST?!
GOT AWAY!
NICE JOB, MUNCIE!
@☆!!!
PUFF PANT
WHEEZE
THEY GOT JANET... I SAW HER FALL...
WOW! YOU JUST KNOW SHE'S GETTIN' IT BAD!

Lenore Goldberg and Her Girl Commandos
Comics

There wasn’t an underground comics scene to speak of in 1969 Los Angeles, but while living in Venice Beach, Shelton got to know Hollywood-based Robert Williams because they were drawing for the same car magazines. Williams was a long-haired, 1950s-handsome virtuoso draftsman whose chromed psychedelia nicely complemented Wilson’s grimy vision. He was the last artist admitted to the original *Zap Comix* seven and balanced the comic book once again between the storytellers and the graphic artists. Williams grew up drawing, fighting, and hot-rodding in Albuquerque in the fifties. He’d been in Los Angeles since 1963. After art school he drew for magazines and, most famously, created maniacally detailed graphics splitting the difference between Basil Wolverton and Salvador Dalí for Ed “Big Daddy” Roth, the genius who popularized the monstrous and surreal Kustom Kulture style, which arose from Southern California’s hot rod culture. Williams’s hot rod background made him the last link in the chain of the visual Americana represented by the group.

Moving between the Kanal Kooth Klub and the Mira Monte Hotel, Robert was working on the fourth issue of *Zap*, the second issue of *Snatch*, and two new solo titles, *Despair* and *Big Ass Comics*. He was drawing so much and so fast to keep up with both the demand and his own consciousness that he rarely bothered to change pen nibs. He simply kept going until the crow quill wore down to a thick nub, producing a broad line. In 1969 alone, he wrote, drew, and published 160 pages of comics, about two-thirds of what an average superhero cartoonist might produce in a given year. His haste was challenging even his own reservations about the material pouring out of his pen: About *Big Ass Comics*, Robert wrote to Marty, “I know it’s sick shit, but it made me feel a lot better to get out the hostility, pawning off my bad kharma [*sic*] on my adoring public. Haw! That's what they get!"

The "sick shit" included "Eggs Ackley Among the Vulture Demonesses"—drawn with a dull crow quill, it's a fourteen-page thick-lined meditation on his lately prolific sex life. Eggs Ackley battles the Vulture Demonesses in the air, on the ground, in their bodies. The finale is an obscene Busby Berkeley cartoon pile-on: the demonesses follow Eggs out a window, he slides into a beak, and his pursuers land buttocks up, beaks down, inserted into one another until Eggs emerges from the final anus announcing: "Safe!" But just as soon as he walks free, he's yanked back into a room and asked to fuck. Here are Robert's absurdly complicated feelings about sex: He craves and enjoys it. He wants to play and wrestle, to dominate and come out on top. He loves and hates women simultaneously, hates himself for his urges but can't help himself. His sex life in those years and the following decades was a cycle of intense desire, accompanying frustration, then fulfillment, relief, and a thrill at acting it out, all to the steady inner dialogue of shame and mortification. He wrote, "Let's face it, I love to oppress women. I enjoy it, truly I do… But only sexually. I don't want to dominate them mentally, or keep them in line all the time or anything… I'm not into being authoritarian toward them. I just like to dominate big women physically, sexually. Ironically, most women want the exact opposite, they want a man to lead them around by the nose mentally but don't want to be subjugated physically in the sexual act… I think it's 'cause they're all fucked up with false notions about love and sex." The back cover, as with *Motor City*, featured an ad for itself—"Don't be a Straggler, Step on the Gas!! Lecher Self Go! Get Behind the *Big Ass*!"

In two years his comics had gone from ecstatic optimism to depraved fantasies. His anonymity vanished, he'd gone from the loner observing the world to suddenly being observed. It turned him upside down. He was also being widely imitated: if companies couldn’t get Crumb himself, they’d get someone just like him. A graphic design studio called Cloud Studios formed in New York, dedicated to gently ripping him off. Record covers and magazine ads started to take on a distinctly rounded, “old-timey” feel. His work was extensively bootlegged in Europe, held up as the lingua franca of the counterculture. Peter Max was for squares. Crumb was liberation. “Keep On Truckin’” characters were appearing, mostly unauthorized, on posters, shirts, patches, bumper stickers, bath mats, magnets, drinking glasses, key chains, and big-rig mudflaps. Michael Krassner, who would soon become Robert’s attorney and later an intellectual property specialist, remembered, “There had never been something so quickly bootlegged across every product type and tier. It was a cultural phenomenon on par with any pop culture moment of the time.”

Merchandisers were knocking on his door and offering plane tickets. In August he was back in New York, flown there by three businessmen with big ideas looking to sign Robert to a five-year exclusive contract for everything he could possibly produce in all media. They brought him to a sex worker with a sprayed blond bouffant who took one look at Robert in his fedora and suit jacket and asked if he was a cop. He chastely slept on her couch. The next night they got him stone drunk, but he still wouldn’t sign the contract. Eventually he wriggled free of these hustlers and simply enjoyed New York. There was drawing to be done for *EVO*, including a jam with Harvey Kurtzman, Spain, and Kim Deitch employing Robert’s beloved phrase “Come the Revolution.” Deitch’s girlfriend at the time was Trina Robbins, a cartoonist, fashion designer, and owner of the hip boutique Broccoli, and, seeing the rampant misogyny overtaking the scene, she was on the cusp of launching her own feminist vision of underground comics that would privilege uplift over splenetic venting.

Following the custom of the day, Trina introduced Robert to a woman while he was in town. Her name was Lark Clark; she was already legendary on the Lower East Side for her beauty and sharp wit, and her story is emblematic of the countercultural journey of many women of that time. Clark survived an abusive childhood on Long Island, ran away from home at age fifteen, and in 1963 entered NYU as a freshman art history major. By age seventeen she'd dropped out and bravely moved to the Lower East Side as a single woman. Fiercely independent, Clark was drawn to the center of the *EVO* and Peace Eye nexus. She got involved with musician Steve Weber of the Holy Modal Rounders, a band that at one time collaborated with the Fugs and epitomized the lyrical avant-garde of the mid-1960s. Unfortunately, Weber was a junkie. They split soon after Clark gave birth to their only child. Looking for a safer place in which to raise the baby, Clark moved to the Upper East Side and worked as a phone operator for a jewelry store.

She remembers Trina calling her about Robert: "Trina says, 'You have the body that Crumb draws, and he's coming to town, so I want you to meet him.' We met at Trina's apartment. I was very surprised. He didn't look like a hippie. Then I started thinking he wasn't a hippie. Crumb was successful and enjoyed by so many people. And we would see his imagery outside of our small scene. He was a cultural force, and he was such a good artist." She suggested she and Robert go upstate to a cabin in Monroe, New York, that she rented with Trina and her ex-boyfriend, writer Paul Williams, and the *Village Voice* journalist all of them loved most, Don McNeill.

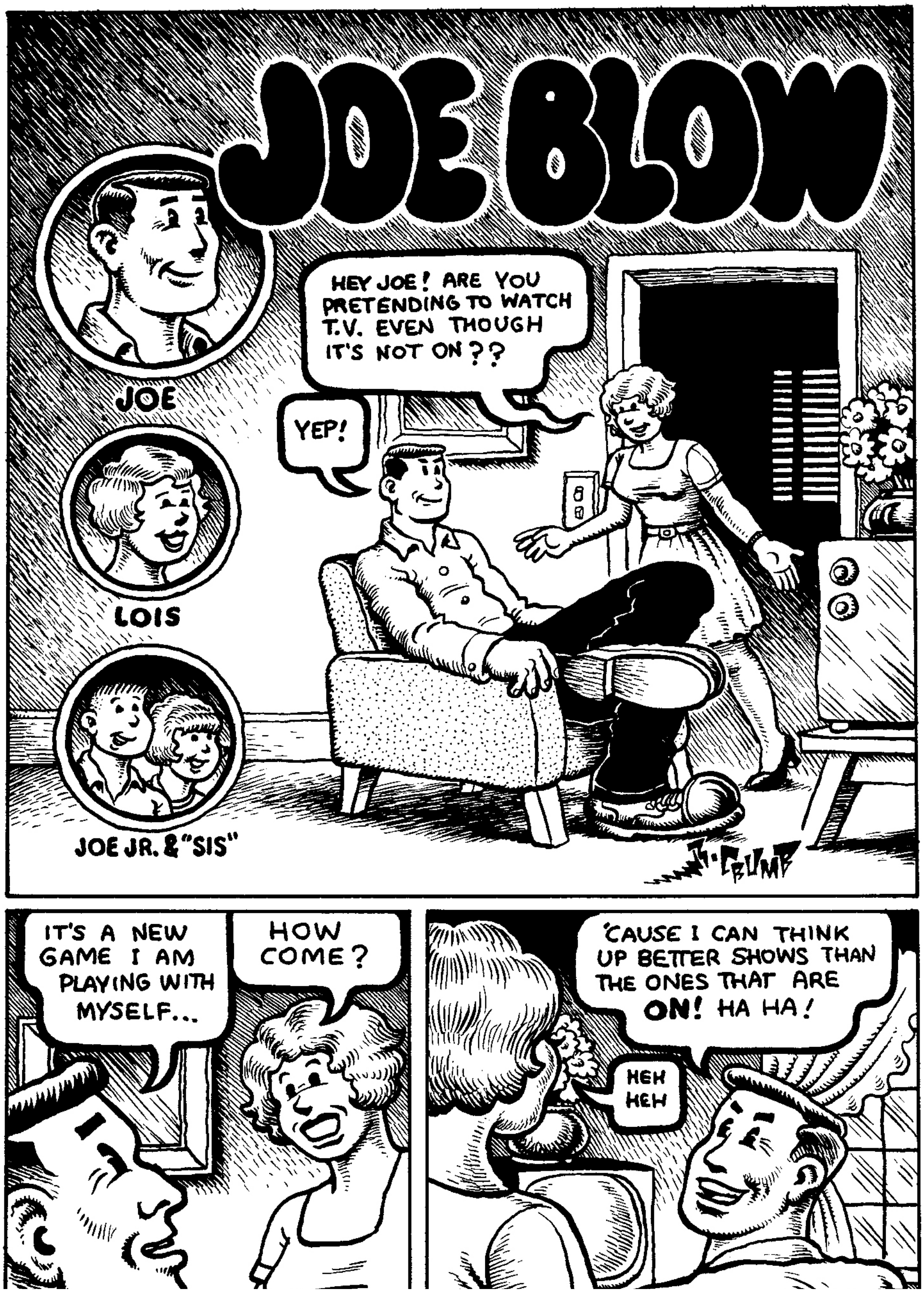
Clark recalls: "I was curious. I was not attracted to him, and that troubled me. I was supposed to have sex with this guy. Everybody was like that. You meet somebody, you have sex with them, then you sort out if you're going to have sex with them again. He was constantly drawing. He was unlike anyone I'd ever met. It was not a kind of thought I was familiar with. He was constantly perceiving and mediating and commenting. He had a steady commentary on everything. He was rather cynical. He was funny. Sex obsessed. I remember the thought going through my mind, 'Is this what a sadist is?' He could be cruel. But he found that amusing. I didn't know how seriously to take it. It didn't occur to me to worry. I lay on a fur rug in front of the fireplace. I made a quiche and spaghetti and we went to Howe Caverns. I'd been there with my parents as a kid. Suddenly the electricity went out. We were plunged into stygian darkness, and we were so scared. We were rushed out of the cavern. He kissed me in such a sweet, sweet way. I felt that he was dispelling that nightmare. And I was shocked that anybody would do that. And maybe most especially him."

On August 30, 1969, Robert's twenty-sixth birthday, Lark dressed up in a special outfit: "a shiny, tight, black low-cut mini-dress, a wide black leather belt around her waist, dark seamed tights, high lace-up black boots, black 'choker' collar around her pale white neck, the whole image finished with a Nazi swastika emblem dangling in the cleavage of her heaving chest." Robert was, and remained for decades, struck by the irony of this, the most beautiful woman in downtown New York presenting herself to him. "I was always gaping at her saying, *you're so beautiful!* One day she'd heard enough of this and said, 'So I'm beautiful, so what?'" This line, and Lark herself, would appear in several of Robert's comics in the next few years. Her confidence, which he read as arrogance, needled him. This was a woman who, on some level, matched his own independence and could move on. He was simultaneously appalled and impressed by her nonchalance and that she would fuck him just because Trina told her he was a significant man in the hippie scene. He couldn't comprehend that she was, like him, someone who was inventing herself, a survivor, and one with nuanced ideas about the world. To her mind, being with Robert was part of the adventure that was her life. Why wouldn't she sleep with him? And who on earth was still hung up on high school rejection?

Robert finished out his monthlong New York trip with Spain Rodriguez at the opening of his second museum show that year (the first, an underground comics group exhibition, was held at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC), the Whitney Museum of American Art's aptly timed *Human Concern/Personal Torment: The Grotesque in American Art*. Robert, in a plaid shirt and corduroy trousers, and Spain, in a striped top and denim jacket look, were at home amid the other artists and revelers. The exhibition was an attempt to summarize the volcanic eruptions in American culture through primarily twentieth-century figurative art, including Robert, Spain, and S. Clay Wilson, alongside artists they themselves felt some kinship with, including Peter Saul, Jim Nutt, Paul Cadmus, H. C. Westermann, Bruce Conner, Nancy Grossman, and Thomas Nast among them. It marked the end of a brief moment when American museums were trying to make sense of the various new populist sensibilities across media by bringing comics, painting, sculpture, and film together in group exhibitions. The idea that a Robert Crumb comic book was as much a fully conceived artwork as a Peter Saul painting is still under consideration, but then, as now, artists like Saul and others knew that Robert's art was inseparable from its printed container, and that he was one of them. Art history and contexts would have to expand to accommodate his achievement.

By October 1969 he was back in San Francisco. *Zap* 4 had rolled off the presses in August, scorching nearly everyone who published it. It was the "69" issue, featuring two front covers by Victor Moscoso that transformed the classic Mr. Peanut icon into a dancing "Mr. Penis." Robert drew the taboo-breaking "Joe Blow" for that issue. It expanded on his earlier *Snatch* 2 centerfold drawing earlier that year of an archetypal suburban family unit fucking and sucking in the living room under the caption “The Family that Lays Together Stays Together.” “Joe Blow” brings that image to narrative life: Here we have Joe; his wife, Lois; and their children, Joe Jr. and Sis. Inside their clean home Joe catches Sis masturbating and suggests a sexual lesson, and there follows a few faithfully rendered close-up panels of incestuous intercourse. Then Lois and Joe Jr. discuss erections and Lois shows Jr. her sex gear. Later, Joe exclaims, “I never realized how much fun you could have with your children.” Sis and Joe Jr. go off giggling into the sunlight, yelling, “Now we know what to do,” as their parents stare earnestly into the distance. Joe intones: “There they go… off to make even more discoveries!” “Yes, youth holds the promise of the future,” says Lois.

In a blizzard of transgression, “Joe Blow” stands out for Robert’s commitment to telling the story with the same matter-of-fact beats as a *Little Lulu* comic book. But “Joe Blow” is shocking not only because of its subject matter and approach but also its explicit message that the American nuclear family was not well. *Zap* 4 was so salacious that the Berkeley police raided the Print Mint before the comic book was even released. Schenker had been tipped off and swiftly moved much of the inventory to the attic of his home, from which he slowly sold copies to trusted vendors. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet and proprietor of City Lights Booksellers, was arrested for selling the issue and paid a $400 fine. In Los Angeles, city police busted the Third Eye and the Psychedelic Supermarket. On October 28, 1970, Judge Joel Tyler of the Criminal Court of New York found *Zap* 4 obscene, and Peter Dargis, manager of East Side Book Shop, and Charles Kirkpatrick, comanager of the New Yorker Bookshop, were convicted of distributing obscene material and fined $500 each. His ruling read, in part, “It is material utterly unredeemed and unredeemable, save, perhaps, only by the quality of the paper upon which it is printed.” He went on to call it part of the underworld press, “filth for filth’s sake,” and part of a “brutalizing trend in society.” The Association of American Publishers and the New York Civil Liberties Union filed briefs requesting the conviction be overturned, but the appeals court upheld the decision. *Zap* 4 became the first comic book to be declared obscene, something Wilson and Moscoso in particular celebrated, as though it cemented their outlaw status. The effect on stores, though, was less celebratory. Even as the underground comic book press boomed, this decision loomed—bookstores took to selling the undergrounds under the counter, like pornography.


JOE BLOW
JOE
LOIS
JOE JR. & "SIS"
HEY JOE! ARE YOU PRETENDING TO WATCH T.V. EVEN THOUGH IT'S NOT ON??
YEP!
R. CRUMB
IT'S A NEW GAME I AM PLAYING WITH MYSELF...
HOW COME?
'CAUSE I CAN THINK UP BETTER SHOWS THAN THE ONES THAT ARE ON! HA HA!
HEH HEH

"Joe Blow," *Zap* No. 4, 1969.

Fritz the Cat had arrived in paperback shortly after *Zap* 4, but from Ballantine Books, not Viking. Earlier in the year Robert broke with Viking when the publisher asked for changes to the book, namely the tying up and rape of one character, and the now-infamous cover featuring Fritz with a breast in his paw. Robert, likely riding pretty high, penned a thorough kiss-off letter to Cole:

> Dear Bill:
>
> YOU GUYS ARE A BUNCH OF CHICKEN-HEARTED, NAMBY-PAMBY, NERVOUS NELLY MUTHAFUCKAS!!!
>
> I did like ya told me; no cunts, pricks or views of creatures in th'act of doing it… it was really hard to resist the temptation of showing Fritz with a great big ol' dong hangin' down there twixt his legs… that was difficult to repress, bust lissen, have faith… tell Viking Press to have faith… tell the salesman to have faith… it'll sell like hotcakes… fuck the respectable book stores… if Viking can't do that, maybe they should sell the rights to Grove Press for the $2500 they paid me… somebody ought to show some guts here… hell, the public is crying for it… the problem certainly is not that it won't sell… the problem seems to me to be Viking's self-image, which it seems to be choking on right now… Maybe my stuff just isn't right for the Viking Press–type market… I mean, if the type of stores they sell to just won't take it, there are certainly plenty of other stores that will…
>
> Somehow I have the feeling I'm talking to a brick wall… trying to swim up a waterfall… it'd be easier just to give up on it and say, ok, do what you want… you've already paid me, I'm livin' off the money for chrissake, I've signed the contract… what the hell… what do I care what you do with it? Except that I remember how I felt when I saw the censorship in the first book… how sick it made me… here is a beautiful printed book of my stuff, only it's censored, cut up, watered down, fucked-over by a bunch of status-quo-fuckin' executives… fuck that shit!!
>
> Times is changin', Bill… changin' fast… when I was doin' that new Fritz stuff, I kept in mind that I wouldn't put anything in it that I thought would make the people who buy my stuff not buy it… I kept in mind what I figured was the general market for my stuff… college-age kids and liberal-minded older people… and I firmly believe that these people would buy a Fritz book even though he is holding a tit on the cover… in fact, I think I'm hip enough to have discerned that the cover will increase sales… the trouble with you guys is, you just don't know what's happening!! You're out of touch… If you could just trust it, it would sell a million…
>
> Them *Snatch* comics go as fast as we can print them, but we're still just a small operation, and you wanna know why? Because all the big-shot publishers are scared of it… just a big bunch of ulcer-ridden cowards, cynics, placid sex-hungry despair-

> infested exploiters, feeding their fat consumer faces with the junk they force millions of people to turn out for them because they're BORED… the faith of their youth, if they ever had any, has long since been crushed by confusion, despair, ignorance and wrong thinking… they're so far gone they'll never get back… but they hold the power, the money, they manipulate the huge masses of energy of technologies, the labor of millions of men who hunger to see some results of their empty work-worn days and who vote for George Wallace because they hate all you candy-assed liberal cowards!
>
> They work for you… they labor in your factories to produce the plastic goop created by cowards…
>
> Somewhere, somehow, somethin's gotta give… it can't go on like this forever… people will get tired of it… people are getting tired of it… I'm tired of it… why should I expend all my energy doing stuff for some big boss man who says "No," THUMBS DOWN, if I say something he doesn't like? The hell with his money!! I'll get my own printing press… I'll get my own distribution… if that doesn't work, I'll mow lawns, sell beads on Haight Street… why should I end up hating myself because I played along with the whims and fat-cat business fears of Viking Press… let THEM get ulcers, let them live in guilt and fear… I don't want to…
>
> So you can tell Viking Press for me:
>
> FUCK YOU!
>
> Love and all Good wishes:
>
> R. Crumb

Incredibly, Cole hung in with his puffed-up author, but by mutual agreement he moved Crumb's deal to Ballantine. Cole genuinely liked Robert. They'd exchanged birth announcements and friendly cards, spent time together in New York. Cole, anticipating more of a career like Shel Silverstein or Edward Gorey, thought this was just the beginning. *Fritz the Cat* and *Head Comix* reprint rights were acquired for Ballantine by Bernard Shir-Cliff, an occasional contributor to *Mad* and *Help!* (it was on his wall that Harvey Kurtzman first saw the ubiquitous "idiot" face that he transformed into Alfred E. Newman's visage) who handled *Mad* reprint paperbacks, among other titles. Shir-Cliff's memo to Cole stipulates that Ballantine would buy out Robert's contract from Viking and offer an additional $5,000 advance to Robert, whom he considered "the most talented new artist since Harvey Kurtzman launched *Mad* magazine more than fifteen years ago." *Fritz the Cat* published in

October 1969 and sold forty thousand copies by the end of the year. A reissue of *Head Comix* followed.

* * *

With the $5,000 advance he'd received from Ballantine for *Fritz*, Robert and Dana set out to find a place up north, like so many of the other Haight artists and musicians. They'd agreed to live separately and have their own relationships but provide for one another and raise Jesse together. This meant finding a place with at least two inhabitable buildings on the property. "We were deeply attached," he remembered. "I spent a large portion of my time simply plotting my escape. Those LSD trips we took together only bonded us deeper. Those experiences bonded us spiritually for life in some mysterious way." Dana had heard about a three-acre spread in Potter Valley, 120 miles north of the city in Mendocino County.

By the end of '69, Mendocino had perhaps a dozen communes, as well as families living in their own homes. Its remoteness and the romance of the frontier, instilled as much through Henry David Thoreau as the Davy Crockett television show, were appealing until the reality, or the first winter, set in. It was not an easy place to inhabit without an outside source of money. Jobs were scarce, rural poverty the norm, and there weren't municipal services in the offing—need water? Dig a well. Local officials, not exactly thrilled with the longhairs, required that they strictly conform to local building codes and sanitation regulations. Most new settlers had to learn from the ground up, or perhaps from the recently published guide to self-sufficient living, *The Whole Earth Catalog*. Without fail it was a tremendous amount of work.

They drove up "through miles of lush terrain, endless miles of backroads and cowpaths traversing obscure mountains… After a fork at an unnamed dam and a perilous half-mile drive along a narrow precipice, farmhouses confront you.” There, along the Eel River and backing up to the Mendocino National Forest, were three structures on three acres owned by a jewelry maker and assorted hippies who’d tried, and failed, to make a go of it up there. At $18,000, it was the only property the Crumbs looked at. They made a down payment of $10,000 and Robert and Dana were the proud owners of their very own communal living experiment. The idea was to bring some friends and fix up the place, plant a garden, get some goats, chickens, horses, and live off the land. Dana would reside in the main house with Jesse, and Robert would live in a cabin down the hill. Other friends were invited to stay as needed. They turned over the keys to Diamond Street to Spain Rodriguez and his girlfriend Janet, with the proviso that Robert and Dana could use it on occasion, and drove up in the 1948 Pontiac, Jesse and two dogs named Howard and Bernice in tow. In the early days it was a bucolic experiment—Dana and Robert each trying to feel their way into life in the country. Robert did his best to ingratiate himself to the local community, playing music at parties and even making prom decorations for his nearest neighbors.

At Christmas, Robert Williams, Spain, Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin, and S. Clay Wilson came up to Potter Valley to celebrate the new place and a successful year for the *Zap* partnership. Because they were nothing if not free, Spain and Robert drove about ninety minutes west to visit Lark Clark at the commune where she had landed. “Lark, a true libertine to the nth degree,” Robert remembered, “told me and Spain she wanted to see us ‘get it on’ together. We both tried to explain to this forceful young free love idealist that as much as we liked each other we were not sexually attracted. ‘Well at least kiss each other. Come on, open up to all possibilities,’ she said. I mentioned a photo I’d seen of two Hells Angels touching tongues and suggested we maybe could do that. So, we did it for two seconds—to Lark’s laughter.” The night’s activities continued until exhaustion and then dawn arrived. Then the revelers were asleep on a chilly cabin floor, windows fogged, way out there in the woods at the end of the sixties.

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CHAPTER 12

Workingman Blues

While Robert was visualizing the dissolution of the American family, his own had become unglued. In late spring of 1969, twenty-two-year-old Sandra had returned to Bea and Chuck's home in Philadelphia. She was pregnant and had told Marty she'd fucked everyone, including the pizza delivery boy, and wanted a divorce. Marty, despite it all, wanted a family no matter who the father was. But Sandra had grown to despise her husband—his obsession with old stuff, his adherence to "patriarchal" values, and his fascination with her family. He was the earner, and she was supposed to be the homemaker. Robert called Sandra in Philadelphia and offered to pay her way out to San Francisco so she could have the baby out there, but she refused.

For a while she was certain she would put up the child for adoption and then move to San Francisco, writing to Jane Lynch in Chicago: "The idea of having to support somebody for the next twenty years of my life is thoroughly repugnant to me. Of course, my parents don't at all go along with this: They wanna see me trapped. They're thinking, there's nothing for me now but to pay the piper. Shit on 'em. I can see it's going to be a real battle. My mother bitterly maintains that I'm giving up the kid so I can be free to 'sleep around with men,' that I'm nothing better than a cold-hearted bitch and a slut, and my goddamned father is determined that I learn 'a sense of responsibility.' Someday things'll be better, right? And I'll be in San Francisco, lolling around all day, high on hash, attending female liberation rallies in the evening, and coming home at nite to my beautiful hippy lover who understands me and isn't hung up with a lot of bourgeois notions of morality like M. Pahls, etc… Oh shit! It's the human condition alright."

Her bravado sounding a lot like Robert's, she brought her chaos home with her. Sandra had a brief affair with her sister Carol's husband, Pat, who would slip into Sandra's room while his wife was downstairs. In July 1969, Sandra took psilocybin with Max and Charles, about which she wrote to Jane, in her Charles-taught block capital letters: "Charles and I visited some of brother Max's friends in Germantown last month and the both of us dropped something that is s'pose to be like acid, only not as strong. Damned if I can remember the name, only it sounds something like 'suicidal.' 'Homicidal' would've been more appropriate 'cause I was really afraid Charles was going to murder someone. He became intensely paranoiac under the influence of this stuff: Began tearing things off the wall, knocking over bookshelves, and calling everyone vile names—even total strangers. That poor bastard's really bottled up with hostility: A pill or a coupla drinks and he bursts. Often times I watch Charles when he's in these drunken, desperate states, and I'm all too painfully reminded of myself and my own frame of mind during some of those crazy sprees in Chicago…" Sandra ultimately decided to keep the baby, born Avery Colorado Pahls, and separately moved with him to San Francisco in 1970. She stayed with Trina Robbins for a while when she first arrived in the city.

Charles never did recover from that mushroom trip. The psilocybin was a bad mix with the other medications he was taking for depression. He later described it as a firecracker exploding in his brain. In 1970, about a year after that trip, Charles attempted suicide by drinking a bottle of Lemon Pledge furniture polish and was committed to Haverford State Hospital for six months. After that, he moved back and remained home, heavily sedated but aware of his plight. Maxon, meanwhile, was working as an auto mechanic and nurturing dreams of acting and writing. He was falling in love with a young actress named Veronica Vertes, who took a keen interest in him and his loquacious family. Vertes, from an abusive household that maintained a “normal” exterior, found a home with the insular and clearly “odd” Crumbs. Bea bottle-fed and set up a little café for her cats. Charles took the cats on walks in the neighborhood. Dinner conversations were verbal jousting sessions between the three siblings, dazzling Veronica. Chuck, she remembers, would come home, walk through the house, and go up the stairs without a word. In 1971, Maxon and Veronica drove out to San Francisco to try their luck among the bohemians.

* * *

Robert was checking in with Sandra and Charles by phone and letter from Potter Valley and San Francisco. He was ever more elusive, trying to carve out some physical and mental space for himself separate from the ongoing demand for comic books and psychedelic drawings for which he was hounded. In November 1969 he was back in the city, bouncing between Diamond Street and a friend’s place in the Mission. His relative prosperity, and additional living space, meant that he could resume his record-collecting obsession, which had declined after he married Dana and then simmered while he moved houses throughout the decade. Record collecting, with its labels and series, its copiously annotated discographies, is a capacious and organized mental space. Robert is obsessive about all of his interests—sex, comics, conspiracy theories. He can lose hours researching a single disc. Robert began searching for 78 rpm records released between 1925 and 1935, that perfect, still localized and individualized era of regional popular music recordings, dance bands, salon orchestras, popular vocalists, jazz bands, blues singers, vaudeville, country string bands, and duets, eventually branching out into the whole world, including all over Europe, South America, Russia, India, Africa, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and Asia.

For years Robert's letters to publishers, fans, and friends were filled with lists of record labels and recording numbers. Robert knew that by asking for payment for artwork and publications in records rather than money, he could tap into local markets across the world. Don't send cash, he might advise, go to the flea market in rural Wisconsin and look for Columbia black-label 300 to 2500 series; Velveteen 15,000, 5,000, and 1000 series; Bluebird early yellow-label 5000 series; and a couple dozen other labels. He owned nearly one thousand records by the end of 1971. This wasn't great for cash flow or for the legacy of his original art, but he didn't much care. He needed those records. 78s transport the listener into a private space and inspire ritualized attention. To hear the music, one must address the object. 78s need delicate handling and a special needle, and contain only one song per side, forcing the listener to get up after each song ends.

His renewed passion for record collecting was also fed by some new friends with whom he could talk sides, like Al Dodge, whom Robert met during one of his weekly trips to the Alameda flea market in the East Bay. Dodge, a broad-shouldered, ponytailed fiend for records, musical instruments, and comic books, grew up in Pasadena. His father was a rocket engineer, and his mother, a homemaker, played piano by ear. He and another local kid, Robert Armstrong, played in a banjo orchestra in the early and mid-1960s, performing at Elks Clubs and shopping centers. Armstrong, whose father was a camera salesman, was, like Al, obsessed with old things —he loved the Civil War period, early-twentieth-century sheet music, *Mad*, and eventually the *East Village Other*, to which his brother gave him a subscription in 1966. Both Al and Bob saw *Zap* soon after it was published in 1968 and were immediately knocked out by the sensibility, storytelling, and jokes.

After high school Dodge moved up to Berkeley. He got a job selling the *Berkeley Barb* on buses in Haight-Ashbury and eventually worked for a comic book dealer housed in Moe's Books. By the time he struck up a conversation with Robert in 1969, he was a seasoned appreciator but not a fanboy. Dodge was, and remains, a great "picker" of stuff, extremely funny, and utterly immune to nonsense. Robert began stopping by Dodge's Berkeley attic to hang out, smoke some dope, and listen to 78s. If they didn't like a tune, they'd chuck it out the window and see if it would slice into the front lawn. They also bonded over a mutual love for Donald Duck cartoonist Carl Barks, whom Dodge had located and been in touch with. Along with a University of California, Berkeley, professor named Don Ault, they were part of a small and informal Barks appreciation group in Northern California, some of whom had even met the great man.

After a few good sessions with Robert, Dodge called Armstrong and urged him up from Pasadena to meet Robert, who brought along his banjo. They both traded Robert records for art, and the three began strumming a bit together. Until that day, Robert's music was almost entirely solo and private, aside from the occasional duet with Dana. He fell into an easy musical exchange with Bob and Al. Dodge, who continues playing and teaching music today, says, "Crumb's a natural talent musically. He had a kind of spastic style that nobody seemed to like, but I thought was the greatest. And Crumb's left-handed, of course. So he played the banjo upside down. He's hitting the high string where the low string should be." Robert, playing the strings from the bottom up, has a naturally staccato sound not unlike the great blues performer Elizabeth Cotten, who also played left-handed. As with comics, Robert practices, still, and listens hard, and while he can't read music, he has a good ear and is able to strum simple rhythms and hear the chord changes and harmonic structure of a song after just a couple of listens. Dodge and Armstrong were unpretentious guys with their own lives, their own hustles, who knew as much about music as he did, could play well, knew how to make drawings and crafts, and were into old comics. Robert still remembers the practical and moral value of Al's picture-framing lessons. Be modest, choose wisely, take your time. Al also persuaded Robert to graduate from his two-bit banjo ukulele to a real tenor banjo, and to replace his 1950s record player with a better turntable, amplifier, and speaker. After his brush with fame and the hustle of underground comics, it was good to find a couple of friends who knew their shit, were comfortable in their skins, and didn't treat Robert as a celebrity.

Despite the spotlight, marital strife, and an ever-chaotic internal life, he was opening up a bit, and at twenty-six finding companions with whom he could again let down his guard. In November of 1969, just as he was moving up to Potter Valley, he began a relationship with Kathy Goodell, an artist he met at an opening at the Berkeley Gallery in downtown San Francisco: "The art was of no interest to me, but there, standing and looking at a piece of art on the wall was this girl—boyoing!—my heart went right up into my throat at the sight of her—she was of average height, cute face with big lips, and oh my god, such a radical forward pelvic tilt, such a shelf in the back as you rarely see on a white woman—the ass boldly thrust out behind, like two basketballs, the legs, standing apart, far in the rear of the upper body; the whole thing so totally cute and appealing. I was transfixed!"

His affair with Lark Clark had emboldened Robert. He got an introduction to Kathy and chatted her up, all the while stifling his "overpowering desire to jump on her protruding butt." Jumping on a woman's back was Robert's opening gambit when he was interested in someone whose physique matched his ideal. It started after he was no longer anonymous—being "R. Crumb" made him very nervous, and the only way he felt he could cope was by either retreating into his sketchbook or acting out. The possibility of a woman he found genuinely attractive, perhaps even “out of his league,” being sexually available short-circuited his rational mind. Robert likened it to a compulsion—a feeling that would come over him, that he had to test this woman’s body. His only response was to leap. He did it to his girlfriends and wives, as well as some acquaintances. Most claimed to find it amusing—he was “R. Crumb,” and generally if he was at an event or gathering in which he was a known factor, Robert might do the “R. Crumb thing.” But some didn’t find it charming at all—they would throw him off, called him a creep or an asshole. As a woman-friend once said to Robert, “You don’t cop a feel. You cop a ride!” This is true. Some men hug a little too long, some go in for an unwanted kiss. Robert jumped. This is who he was. It’s a sign of those times that so many women blithely accepted his behavior.

In 1969, Kathy Goodell was a twenty-two-year-old sculptor recently transplanted from her hometown of Sacramento to San Francisco, where she would finish her MFA. Goodell was smart, funny, quick-witted, and hot-tempered. She was not a comics fan, but like any art student in those days, she was aware of the Crumb phenomenon. The night after they met, they went out to dinner. He recounted, “I broached a subject that had been on my mind. ‘So, uh, your ass looks like it would be strong.’ ‘Oh, it’s pretty strong alright,’ Kathy replied in a friendly, enthusiastic manner. A real meeting of the minds.” They had an instant physical connection; she brought him home to her little apartment with a Murphy bed at the bottom of Nob Hill.

She was taken by his unique combination of sweetness and cynicism, and his willingness to talk for hours about any subject. It was an affair that would last, albeit not exclusively, for five years. Kathy moved to a larger apartment on Hampshire Street, and her friend from Sacramento Lela Janushkowsky soon followed. Robert would go back and forth between Potter Valley and Kathy's place nearly every month. He was her first real love. "We would have the most amazing conversations. I mean in the bathtub usually… besides the sexual kind of dominance thing that he was really into, he was really fun to talk to and really good at intimacy on one level, on a certain level. But then conflicted by it. My parents had this fantastic relationship their whole life. I thought if you love someone, you forgive certain things." Those things included his numerous other affairs (including one with Lela), and a penchant for both lying and disappearing. Kathy remembers, "One morning he called me and said, 'Oh, I love you. I miss you.' I asked when he'd be down in the city and he said he didn't know. And then I went to a coffee shop and he was on the street! He had just called me and said he was in Potter Valley." Neither slick nor particularly promising as boyfriend material, Robert could also be oblivious to the hurtfulness of his actions. And while he had little interest in the artists she hung out with, among them the influential conceptual artist Terry Fox and the brilliant painter Judith Linhares, Kathy appreciated his work and rightly saw it as part of a tradition that stretched back to Daumier and Hogarth: "He had a moment where everything came together. It was like he could reveal what was really under the surface and the culture. And I really appreciated that, as well as just the beauty of his line."

* * *

Soon after the *Fritz* book was released in 1969, Ballantine Books' Bernard Shir-Cliff was approached by a television producer named Steve Krantz, who, with a thirty-one-year-old animator named Ralph Bakshi, wanted to make an animated adult feature. X-rated films were, like the rest of pornography, doing big business nationally. An animated adult film would stand out from the crowd and make history. First they approached and were rejected by Harvey Kurtzman and *Playboy* for *Little Annie Fanny*, so they moved on to *Fritz the Cat*. Krantz initially offered $2,000 to Robert to just visit the New York studio and see some preliminary drawings and rough animations, and another $10,000 advance against royalties if the film was released. Robert's provisions for even taking a meeting were that he didn't want it to look like the schlocky Saturday morning cartoons that Krantz and Bakshi had made; he wished to be consulted; he wanted the animation done in Los Angeles, where a new friend, Disney animator Ward Kimball, could put him in touch with some colleagues, and if not, Robert needed to be fronted travel money and a per diem for any trips to New York. Bakshi, who'd come up worshipping many of the same cartoonists as Robert but was stuck doing low-grade animation for Marvel superheroes, saw Robert as a kindred spirit and Fritz as a chance to stretch out; Krantz saw dollar signs; Shir-Cliff saw book sales. Robert, always willing to take a free airline ticket, never thought the thing would even happen. He took the two grand and a flight to New York in February 1970.

Robert went straight over to the studio to see the tests: "I didn't really love Bakshi's drawings; they were okay. I was real distressed; I walked around New York for a couple of days, wondering what the hell I was going to do. They had all this work done, they had gone ahead and done all this work before they even contacted me. Then he asked me if it was okay with me if they did it." When Robert returned to the studio for another meeting, he remembered, "I guess I did tell him no, but he said, 'Don't say no, let us work on it a little more before you say no, and show you some more stuff,' blah blah blah, just leading me on and leading me on. I never gave him a firm 'no… don't use my characters or I'll get my lawyers on you.'"

And with that, Robert disappeared back into Manhattan. Robert, for all his ambition and willpower, wanted to be liked. In Bakshi's case, he couldn't bring himself to just shut it down. He initially believed in the animator's (real) sincerity, and, as he said, he didn't want the work to go to waste. He could be forceful when he felt cornered, as with Viking, but mostly he had a way of leaving things open-ended, causing a certain amount of chaos for whomever he dealt with. It was a crapshoot whether or not he would dismiss or embrace the final product.

Everyone involved had a different account of what followed, but ultimately, with Krantz unable to find Robert, Shir-Cliff called Cole, who in turn called Dana, who had power of attorney for Robert. They needed the money to work on Potter Valley, so she readily agreed to the deal. In return, after all the players got their tastes, the Crumbs received seven thousand dollars and a percentage of the film's gross proceeds. Production cranked to life, with a Bakshi script mashing together Robert's 1965–68 Fritz stories.

While he was in New York on Krantz's dime, Robert drew the cover for the February 11, 1970, issue of *EVO*: "Burned Out" is a self-portrait of the artist at the edge of sanity, eyeballs out of his head, hand pulling his tongue out, skull popped open like a firecracker (though of a different caliber than Charles's), smoke wafting out and flies buzzing around. The city abounds with signs of big business. The counterculture utopian dream was over. The Manson murders six months before, the violence and killing at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont soon after that, and the decline of the underground press closed out the sixties. *EVO*, along with the counterculture, was starting to wind down. All the outlets that made the underground press viable were shifting, and the personalities were now rethinking their lives. Getting jobs, changing. The revolutionaries, Robert among them, were exhausted. He flew back to San Francisco at the end of February.

Later in the year, Bakshi and Krantz traveled to San Francisco to show Robert some more test footage at a screening room downtown. Predictably, once again, Robert's response was tepid, and Bakshi begged him to be supportive, reminding him of the signed contract. Dana remembered that day with exasperation: "Robert was there in San Francisco so they flew Ralph Bakshi out. Robert wanted to go to the flea market at Alameda that Sunday, so I'm in the back of this convertible that Bakshi rented, and I have a [two-year-old] baby, and Robert and Bakshi were in the front of the car. So we drove across the bridge, we got to the flea market, and Bakshi's driving around really slowly as he looks for a place to park —pressuring Crumb the whole time and being so obnoxious… and then Robert suddenly bolted up over the closed door of this convertible and ran off into this huge crowd—leaving me trapped with my baby and with Ralph Bakshi. So we looked everywhere for Robert, never found him, and finally just went back to the city." From Alameda, Robert hooked up with Shelly Rosen and Eric Preisler and drove up to the town of Chico, California, took LSD, and hid out for a few days, leaving Bakshi and Krantz with Dana and Jesse. Eventually, Robert made his way back to Potter Valley.

Nothing Bakshi did was going to please Robert, who, of course, really wanted anything he did to at least approximate the classic mode of Disney storytelling—beautifully painted backgrounds; long, slow shots; round characters moving in dimensional space. Bakshi was doing something that became revolutionary but looked, to Robert, like some cheap artsy affect: stained watercolor backgrounds, herky-jerky vérité-style camera angles, and worst of all, no sense of irony. What Robert played as absurd, Bakshi played for easy laughs, presaging movies like *Animal House*.

There was plenty of work to be done in Potter Valley in late 1970. The property had three structures on it then: The “Big House,” where Dana and Jesse lived, had two small bedrooms, a living-dining area with a purple enamel wood-burning stove, and a kitchen. Next to the house was a toolshed and next to that was Robert’s small cabin, set up much the same as his studio on Clayton Street. The drawing table, covered with supplies, faced the front window, around which were arrayed photos and other ephemera. It was flanked by a bookcase filled with meticulously filed 78s on one side and an overstuffed chair on the other. Another set of shelves was filled with magazines, toy cars, toy robots, model airplanes, and other detritus of his beloved century. On the back wall was a crudely built fireplace that filled the cabin with smoke whenever it was in use.

That year, Al Dodge and Robert Armstrong would visit and stay for a while, putting up drywall, repairing fences, and doing some house painting. During one of Robert’s too-long walkabouts, Dana invited Paul Seidman, a San Francisco acquaintance whose girlfriend had just committed suicide, to stay at their place, rest for a while, and recover from the tragedy. He wound up working eight to ten hours a day looking after the house, Jesse, three gardens, twenty-five to thirty chickens, two goats, and two horses. There were plenty of eggs but also a ton of manure to shovel—the horses were good for romantic rides but not for much else. Paul and Robert sometimes split firewood together and tended to the garden; they built an enormous fireplace out of stone in the main house. Dana and Paul became lovers after a while, and he was a steadying presence on the property.

There were usually communal dinners attended by the Crumbs, Paul, and whoever was visiting at the time; plenty of dope smoking; and a dollop of simmering tensions between Dana and Robert. Dana was beset by migraines and was deep into Percocet, sometimes locking herself in her bedroom (equipped with an enormous waterbed) for two to three days at a time, leaving Robert and Paul to run the place. There were times of beauty, times of real desolation, and a summer so hot and arid that the ink in Robert's Rapidograph ran dry. He published 160 pages in 1970—far beyond any other underground cartoonist. "That was a really crazy time," Robert remembered. "It was all very unstable. People came and went; it was anarchy. My comics were supporting the whole thing. When everybody was hanging around and taking up my time during the day I had to work at night. I have the memory of this in my mind, sitting in my little cabin in Potter Valley with all these people just sitting around, wanting to be entertained, wanting to smoke dope. Trying to get some work done was impossible. I would work all night 'til like 5 in the morning, then sleep 'til like 1 in the afternoon."

In his cabin at the end of 1970, he finished *Home Grown Funnies*, combining his ever-present interest in the strange and paranormal—in this case a book on the Bigfoot phenomenon, a recent Bigfoot scare in the Mendocino National Forest, and his abiding love of large women, as well as his own back-to-the-land adventures. He started it, as always, with the cover—sometimes, as in this case, a title might work graphically and then become the formal title of the comic book. The central image—a nude gnomic fellow whistling in the woods—had nothing to do with the interior; it's just a good cover. Inside are twenty-two pages of "Whiteman Meets Big Foot," Robert's longest story to date. Whiteman is now a bespectacled suburban fellow off on a two-week vacation in his 1971 Winnebago, wife and kids in tow. Out on a hike, he's abducted by Big Foot, who eventually gives him to his daughter, Yeti, as a mate. Terrified at first, gradually, through vigorous sex, Whiteman falls in love with Yeti. Six weeks later, he is transformed out in the woods but wants to bring Yeti to meet his family and perhaps all live together. This, of course, goes horribly wrong, and after a fight, capture, and separation, Whiteman frees Yeti and the two return to the forest.

The story is, if not exactly an apologia, a subtle plea for understanding. Much of the action is focused on the vast misunderstanding of Yeti's beauty and Whiteman's needs. He learns, through Yeti, that she is all he needs. Sexual obsession with big women aside, Robert also wanted to run away into the wilderness and hide from society, just like Whiteman. Potter Valley was halfway there. He never advocates for "civilizing" Yeti. Robert, if nothing else, tends to take people as who they are, and asks the same for himself. His sociopolitical wisdom boils down to acceptance. In 1976, Robert reflected on the consequences and risks of his ideas: "Being open about [his 'obsession with big women'] with the world is a complete shot in the dark, a total gamble. I can see how it could be positive in that it is basically in no way malevolent or anti-humanistic. It doesn't break the basic taboos such as child-molesting does, and by being open about it, perhaps it drives home the point that people have a right to be themselves as long as it doesn't hurt anybody, and that people should be more relaxed about their own individual quirks, as long as no one else is threatened. Also, that sex is sort of de-romanticized and becomes more playful, more humorous. The disadvantage of this approach, the dark side of it is, that our society being what it is, if you encourage openness about sex, if you de-romanticize sex, the hypesters, the exploiters, the hustlers turn it into a new way to dehumanize people. Society becomes more hedonistic. People don't know where to draw the line." Madison, Wisconsin, cartoonist and entrepreneur Denis Kitchen's Kitchen Sink Press published *Home Grown* in early 1971 and by May there were thirty thousand copies in print. By the end of 1973, they were at eighty thousand copies, with Robert receiving a royalty of six cents a copy, totaling $4,800. Not bad for one among many comic books.

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CHAPTER 13

Big Business

With *Zap* Robert had inadvertently created something far beyond just a single comic book title. By 1970 the underground comics movement itself had gone mainstream and become a mini-industry. The psychedelic posters had mostly vanished and underground newspapers were in decline, so the comics were the newest, and last, countercultural ephemera. What had been a smattering of cartoonists and stores around the country at the end of 1968 was now a wave of dozens of artists, a handful of publishers and distributors, and eager stores in every college town around the country. “The comix thing,” Robert said, “is the first time anything like that has ever happened where cartoonists became completely free to express themselves the way they wanted to. It’s a whole new phenomenon and the fact that it’s being printed and distributed, even on a small level, is really a whole new wave.” And it was also the first time that cartoonists entirely owned their creations, in some cases controlling the printing and distribution as well. As the decade turned, artists and hucksters alike became publishers in order to encourage, keep up with, and sometimes cash in on the underground comics phenomenon.

In 1969, *Feds ’n’ Heads* cartoonist Gilbert Shelton and three partners, all newly relocated to San Francisco from Texas, each put in $75 for a $300 down payment on a $1,000 offset press, capable of fourteen-by-seventeen-inch sheets, and founded Rip Off Press. They intended to print concert posters, but, lacking the skill and clientele, they began printing and publishing comics and T-shirts by

Shelton himself, Crumb, and many others. Erstwhile *Zap* publisher Don Donahue was selling as many copies of *Snatch* as he could print, as well as the follow-up *Jiz* (a worthy successor in which Robert published "Dick-Nose," about, among other things, anal sex) and Rory Hayes's *Cunt*. Robert remembered visiting Donahue at his print shop: "He was just standing over the press—the press is going, the pages are coming out and just flopping onto the floor, coming out of the press and falling onto the floor. And he's standing there with his bottle of whiskey, just watching this. And they're just going right into a big, random pile on the floor. I said, 'How come you're letting them fall in a big, random pile like that?' And he said, 'Oh, the ink dries better that way than if they fall on a stack. Sometimes on a stack they stain each other.'"

The retailer at the center of the San Francisco scene, Gary Arlington, was publishing his own anthology title, *San Francisco Comic Book*, as well as Robert's *Mr. Natural* solo title. A leftist environmentalist named Ron Turner started Last Gasp Eco-Funnies in Berkeley and published twenty thousand copies of his eco-themed comic, *Slow Death*, for the first Earth Day celebration. Publishers traded customer lists and distributed each other's books. Rip Off Press helped get more comics into Texas, while Kitchen Sink's Denis Kitchen worked on the Midwest. The biggest of the bunch, Berkeley's the Print Mint, was also still going strong with *Zap*—by 1972, the title's first six issues totaled one million copies in print—as well as its own anthology, *Yellow Dog*; numerous other titles; and a distribution service for smaller publishers.

Recognizing that the new comics offered insight into the way Americans were seeing themselves, and sex, in late 1970, *Playboy* published a ten-page feature entitled "The International Comix Conspiracy," in which the writer Jacob Brackman traced the lineage of the new medium back to *Mad* and forward through Robert, Spain, Shelton, S. Clay Wilson, and the rest. It was the first major publication to take a long look at the phenomenon, and it nicely pointed to the diversity of approaches within the medium. After the article was published, letters on the subject poured into *Playboy*, many from veterans of the comics business, including *Mad* Fold-In artist Al Jaffee, who wrote, “I always felt the medium got a royal screwing from self-serving censors and kiddie protectors who took the guts out of it. Now, at long last, Bob Crumb and cohorts are reversing the process with some screwing of their own. Some of their stuff is brilliant, some of it is lousy—but all of it is free of death-dealing censorship. And, as always happens in matters of this sort, the good stuff will thrive and the bad will disappear. It is about time to give comics a chance to become an adult art form. Movies did it. Why not comics?” The old bogeyman of censorship, Fredric Wertham himself, chimed in about the medium: “Their very crudity and utter vulgarity will by themselves prove self-defeating in the long run.” The exposure from the *Playboy* article resulted in an enormous sales surge. The Rip Off Press’s primary pressman, Dave Moriaty, remembered working 180 days without a break, with print runs rocketing to 250,000 for Shelton’s comic book *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*.

The demand for new underground comics of any kind was strong enough that even middling titles would print ten or twenty thousand copies at a time, rising to thirty thousand or even fifty thousand copies, and second and third printings were not uncommon. It was possible, if an artist was prolific, to earn a meager living working in the medium. Rent was only about $100 a month, and everything else could be cadged on the fly. Last Gasp and Print Mint would sometimes offer a little advance against royalties, enabling cartoonists to stay afloat while finishing their pages. The average rate was $25 a page, with $200 for the cover. At thirty-two black and white pages, a prolific artist could land $1,000 up front per comic against royalties of six to eight cents per copy sold at fifty cents each. Anthology titles and the remaining underground papers offered additional forums that might pay up to $50 a page. The proliferation of venues and opportunities for paychecks meant that dedicated cartoonists could develop their skills and find an audience in the space of a few years.

Cartoonists were still flocking to San Francisco: Spain, Kim Deitch, Trina Robbins, and Art Spiegelman all arrived between 1969 and 1972, and most moved to the Mission District, creating a short-lived underground comics neighborhood alive with studio visits and parties. Except for Kitchen, who remained in Wisconsin, and a few fly-by-night operations (including head shop supply companies like Adam's Apple in Chicago and Head Imports in Aspen), the entire publishing apparatus was in the Bay Area. Underground cartoonists would report artistic conversion experiences. Bill Griffith, a Long Island–raised painter in New York, was casting about for a purpose. He and Kim Deitch had been classmates at Pratt in the early 1960s, and he began to follow the comics in *EVO* in 1967, but it was the first *Zap* that set him loose. Comics could reach tens of thousands more people than painting—that would be his medium. After publishing comics in *Screw* and the *East Village Other*, he moved to San Francisco for the same reason as many other cartoonists: why stay in dreary, disconnected New York (or anywhere) and wait for rejection slips when you could live in a beautiful city with great weather? A young artist could drop into a publisher's office and get a pretty good feel for whether or not they'd be published, which is exactly how Griffith sold his first comic book, *Tales of Toad*, to the Print Mint in 1970. After seeing Robert's work in *Yarrowstalks* in 1967, a half-Catholic, half-Jewish Chicago-born artist named Justin Green had a revelation: "There was something so real about these little figures. At first I thought it was because of the scale. They were like finger puppets. Then and there I saw how flexible the medium was. The words could affect the speed of the drawing or the drawings could entirely obliterate or contradict the words.” He left his teaching job at Syracuse University and soon moved to San Francisco to become a cartoonist.

It was an ebullient time, but it wasn’t an easy calling. There were occasional illustration gigs but there were no secure teaching jobs or grants, no infrastructure at all, save the United Cartoon Workers of America, a union founded in Spain’s living room in the fall of 1970. They wanted a baseline royalty rate of 10 percent of cover price, which they got, and the option to collectively bargain with publishers, if necessary. The artists were keenly aware that their cartoonist heroes, Harvey Kurtzman in particular, had lost control of, and never been adequately compensated for, their creations. This wouldn’t happen to them. They would do whatever they wanted and own it, too. This was a revolution in cultural control that dignified the cartoonist as an artist. It also worked against the notions of the anonymous cartoon image by placing a name with the cartoonist. So the underground labored. No one was getting rich, but everyone was young, rents were cheap, and there was a feeling of being a part of something new.

Underground comics were making their way to Europe, as well. Amsterdam was the first city to have them for sale: a comic-loving pilot for KLM airlines would buy a stack from the San Francisco Comic Book Company and drop them off at the city’s local head shop, the Real Free Press. Various titles were imported and sold at stores in Paris by mid-1969, and Robert was first published in French in the final two issues of the student communist magazine *Action* in 1969; Jean-François Bizot, the gadabout editor of the widely popular French counterculture magazine *Actuel*, began publishing him the following year, creating a profound effect on French comics. Every serious cartoonist, no matter how successful, reevaluated their approach. By the early 1970s, Robert was printed regularly in Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, and

Germany, the latter with a particularly receptive readership; *Head Comix* was published in translation in 1970, and in 1972 a German television crew descended on Potter Valley to film the maestro at work. Bizot's *Actuel* would go on to release three paperback collections of Robert's work between 1971 and 1974, cementing his status, along with Gilbert Shelton, as the preeminent cartoon voice of the international underground.

As a whole the variety of underground comics circa 1970 resembled a cracked mirror image of pop culture comic books, though free of the dreaded Comics Code. Underground cartoonists pumped out horror, crime, fantasy, humor, and science fiction comics alongside psychedelic meanderings, satire, and what would evolve into a mode of literary fiction, but all for adults, entirely without any restrictions, and artist owned. There was also a current, as in the rest of the counterculture, of gleeful adolescent misogyny. And not just limited to *Snatch*—it ran throughout the boyish underground.

Feminism was still in its early stages, and the responses to the violent sexism in underground comics was scattershot. Written critiques remained the province of men, and nearly all ignored the gender politics of the work. In Chicago, Jane Lynch responded with a funny and revealing newsletter, *Little Ladies*, detailing the lives of the wives and girlfriends of the underground dudes. *East Village Other* cartoonist Trina Robbins, however, formulated a cartoon response of her own. She was appalled by what had become of her peers: "Crumb's very sweet retro comics took on a darker look, and he started drawing women being humiliated and raped, men having sex with little girls. The guys (and some of their girlfriends) continued to think Crumb was hilarious, but, suddenly, I didn't get it. Rape and humiliation—and later, torturing and murdering women—don't seem funny to me. The guys told me I had no sense of humor." Robbins's critique wasn't just that the work was unfunny, but that the danger of publishing it outweighed its value as catharsis. She wasn't advocating censorship, but she was asking, rather, what these images might encourage in an already sexist culture in which men held the power. Why, she asked, couldn't everyone be liberated together?

In 1970, Robbins published the first all-female comics anthology, *It Ain't Me, Babe*, with Last Gasp, and followed it up with *All Girl Thrills*. With contributions by fellow *EVO* artists Barbara "Willy" Mendes and Nancy Kalish (who drew as Panzika), these were comic books meant to uplift, inspire, and advise women, and offer a forum in which they didn't have to tacitly endorse rape fantasies. Robbins began encouraging other women to get involved, looking to counteract the wave of male aggression in the comics and offer something more sympathetic to female readers.

Robert responded to this with some targeted aggression of his own in 1971—"And Now, a Word to You Feminist Women," published in *Big Ass Comics* 2: a sixteen-panel monologue, artist-to-audience, in which he argues that he's simply an artist, aware of his darkness and free to make work that shouldn't be interpreted as having a message. At the end, he undercuts the argument by drawing himself enraged, shouting: "Well, listen you dumb-assed broads, I'm gonna draw what I fucking-well please to draw, and if you don't like it, FUCK YOU!!" Robert is his own worst advocate. The impulse to explain himself is as pressing as his rage that he should ever have to explain himself. And so he plays the cartoon fool.

That same year, on the cover of Jay Lynch's anthology *Bijou Funnies* number 6, Robert drew a shaggy-haired dude apologizing for his chauvinism to his dubious companion at the kitchen table: "I… I… guess I just don't… er… didn't have enough respect for women… I'll do my best to be more conscious of my chauvinism in the future… I promise I will!" She responds, "The proof is in the pudding, buster!" It was a depiction of a conversation with Kathy

Goodell's roommate, Lela, at their apartment on York Street in San Francisco. As Robert remembered, "I would show up at their place and plop myself down on the raggedy sofa and smoke some pot with whoever was hanging out there at the time and freely maul the nearest attractive female. Toward evening it was assumed that the girls would throw together some kind of dinner. They usually did, in fact. As for helping out in the kitchen, or helping with the cleaning or fixing broken appliances or anything of that sort, it never entered the minds of 'sensitive' males like me. Then along came feminism circa 1970, 71. That's when, instead of crying fits, craven begging or sullen silence, we started getting lectures and scoldings. Thus the scene on the *Bijou Funnies* cover. I really said those things the guy is saying, after being told just what a jerk I was. She had joined a new feminist discussion group. Her eyes had been opened. Just because you were a hip young woman, you were not obliged to 'put out' to every guy who 'came on' to you, nor make dinner, nor let good-for-nothing foot-loose hippie boys loll about your place for days on end without lifting a finger to help out or even buying any groceries. It was truly a sobering change in business all around generally for the better. It produced an improvement in male character and attitude, I think. Sure there was some excessiveness and over reaction in that early feminist movement. I came in for a lot of shit from feminists in those days because of the crazy, violent sexual content of my comics. My feelin's was hurt, I felt deeply misunderstood, but, yeah, I was a 'male chauvinist' asshole."

In 1972, Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli began publishing their own comic book, *Tits & Clits*, explicitly about the female experience of sexual liberation, and sent a copy to Robert, who wrote back, calling it "enlightening as well as being funny." By then, just maybe, he was beginning to see another side to the argument.

Robert felt obligated to partner with nearly all of the new underground comics publishers emerging in those early years. A Crumb cover, story, or entire comic book could make a real financial difference: “I thought they’d all go under if I didn’t keep feeding them R. Crumb comics on a regular basis. The whole WORLD would come apart at the seams… civilization would crumble, if I didn’t keep those comics coming!” In 1970, he published four distinctly made comic books: *Despair* (Print Mint), *Motor City* 2 (Rip Off Press), *Uneeda* (Print Mint), and *Mr. Natural* 1 (San Francisco Comic Book Company); and he contributed to anthologies including *Zap* 5 and *Thrilling Murder Comics* (San Francisco Comic Book Company). Robert’s comic book covers, which call back to matchbook covers, labels, and other prewar handmade graphics, have always stood out for their graphic sophistication. In the early days his technical skills, honed at American Greetings, meant that his colors and compositions were crisp and clear when so much underground media was either deliberately obscure or roughly collaged. His stories permeated the scene as much as his visuals. Things across the United States were cracked open, and Robert was not only showing the squares what they were but the hipsters, too. And both audiences laughed it up while the ground beneath them was crumbling.

Robert knew as much, and at times, as in *Despair*, he hit a vein of introspection, producing the five-page meditation “It’s Really Too Bad,” in which he laments the modern world, reprising many of his complaints about cultural and chemical pollution, generational conflict, ideologies, and deflated student dreams. He also managed one of his best hippie satires with “The Lighter Than Air Boys,” starring Merciful Percival and Seymour “Sy” Klopps (who were based on Eric Preisler and his friend John Smith) as two spiritual dudes whose discussion of cessation of desire ends when they spot a comely blonde. As they fall into an argument over the blonde (“Percy is actually a veteran dope dealer and a well-known rip-off artist besides." "Seymour has a reputation as the heaviest bullshitter in all of hippiedom, not to mention his phony come-ons with chicks…"), a hip Black guy makes off with their object of attention. Not only are they frauds, but they're oblivious blowhards, too. Preisler and Smith were not amused by the send-up. There's a hard edge to it, reflecting Robert's feelings that, as much as he liked them, he knew that these guys—maybe the whole counterculture—could easily go home, or go back to college, or, having been to college, just as easily go get a real job. For him, the Haight was a zone of low-stakes rebellion. Fun, sure, and a good place to get laid, but ultimately a lot of bourgeois foolishness. Robert didn't have a backup plan. If all else failed, he could've gone back to Cleveland and American Greetings, but going home was not an option.

Potter Valley also found its way into comics like "It's a Workaday World" from *Uneeda*, in which the forever-disciple Flakey Foont has become a farmer, raking hay under the hot sun, hands covered in blisters. Mr. Natural appears and hands ol' Foont a pitchfork, and offers this lesson: "Get the right tool for the job!" The speed of Robert's publishing meant that the art was inconsistent—in some ways much more like the comic books of his youth. Some stories look tight and focused, others rushed and sloppy.

For *Zap* 5 Robert drew "The Adventures of Fuzzy the Bunny," taken panel-for-panel from a 1952 comic by Charles that Robert had looked at on a trip to Philadelphia earlier in 1970. It was his first trip home in four years. He visited Charles in Haverford State Hospital and found him heavily medicated, foggy and sluggish, no longer energetic enough to preside over lengthy truth sessions. Redrawing this comic was as close as Robert could get to collaborating with his brother again, and where the original is all simple outlines, the 1970 version is carefully drawn. Granted three wishes, Fuzzy and Donny swoop over an ocean, go to Saturn, head back to suburbia, and, in the end, wind up sitting on a bed of nails meditating together. There's not a wink or a nudge in sight, making it a warm, longing acknowledgment of his former partner in comics.

With the exception of "The Adventures of Fuzzy the Bunny," most of Robert's comics in the 1960s and '70s are essentially improvised. He was not attempting to be self-consciously literary. He was acting on intuition, examining and processing the world around him at a frantic pace, without guardrails, and whatever arrived was published. And unlike his fellow underground cartoonists, many of whom had only just begun making comics, having switched over from painting, printmaking, or design, Robert had by then been making comics at a professional level for over a decade. A Robert Crumb story from that time, or any time, means entering entirely into his visual domain—a bus looks like a Crumb bus, a streetlamp like a Crumb streetlamp. Very few cartoonists—perhaps only *Peanuts*' Charles Schulz and Krazy Kat's George Herriman—have accomplished this total vision.

* * *

Maxon and Veronica followed the waves of cross-country cartoonists and drove from Philadelphia to San Francisco in the summer of 1970. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare agreed that his untreated epilepsy rendered Maxon unable to work and enrolled him in the General Assistance program. He received a monthly check for $83.40 to keep him afloat while he pursued his creative interests with his free time. Submitting short stories to magazines and a novel to Random House, to no response. Maxon also began painting and drawing meticulously detailed emaciated bodies in scenes of abjection and revelation. Like Charles before him, his drawings seemed to pull in on themselves; he began obsessive stippling, creating surrealist images of nude women in various kinds of distress. Maxon and Veronica, along with the likewise newly arrived Sandra and Avery, visited Robert at Kathy's place on Brazil Street and occasionally up in Potter Valley. Sandra was working, as Dana had before her, at the Florence Crittenton Home for Unwed Mothers. She also began exploring her own feminism and sexuality, soon coming out as lesbian.

In the early 1970s, most of Robert's cartooning happened late at night in Potter Valley or while on the road somewhere in America. He rode the bus to San Francisco about once a month, staying a week or two at a time at Kathy Goodell's place. These trips were packed with meetings, socializing, record hunting, and sex. Kathy wisely tended to stay in the city. The first time she drove up to Potter Valley, Dana spotted the mistress-mobile cresting the hill, got in her truck, and nearly ran Kathy off the road. One weekend, with Dana out of town, Kathy had been staying with Robert in the cabin. When Dana was due to return, Robert, afraid of her finding Kathy in Potter Valley, begged Kathy to leave. She was indignant, and she was right. Dana had Paul, but Robert dreaded confrontations. When Dana arrived, she grabbed her shotgun and fired the thing.

"Kathy and I could hear it inside the cabin. I had no idea where Dana was aiming the gun. I couldn't confront her. I begged Kathy to leave, she still refused to go. She stood her ground. My nerves were already frazzled. I totally lost it, began screaming at her to get out, picked up an old wooden folding chair and slammed it down on her back, as she turned away to shield herself, and backed into me with her butt in such a way that it was actually hard to really hit her with full impact with the chair. Then I accidentally hit myself in the head with the broken chair and was bleeding so much that my glasses became covered with blood and I couldn't see out of them. I was screaming at her, 'Get out! Get out!' and trying to push her out the door. She wouldn't budge." Robert ran off and hid overnight in an abandoned shack by the creek. The next day, still spying Kathy's black '56 Pontiac, he hid in some shrubbery at the edge of the property. "At one point in the afternoon she came up the hill looking for me, calling my name, 'Robert! Robert!' She walked right by me, a few feet away. I kept still, barely breathing, until she was gone. I kind of felt sorry for her but really couldn't deal with her just then, or anyone, waited till evening and then crept back down the hill. Her fucking car was still there! I expected to spend another night hiding out somewhere. I was dying of thirst and went down to the creek to get a drink of water. I came to the bank and saw her sitting there. She heard my approach and turned around and looked at me. And as I immediately turned and ran back up the bank away from her, I heard a big splash in the river. It was getting dark. I trudged back to the cabin and went in. I found a note on my desk from Kathy. It was a suicide note. First she went on about what a worthless person she was, then there was a long, detailed listing of who was supposed to inherit what of her possessions, her clothes, etc. I sat contemplating this for a short while when there was a timid knock at the door. It was her, all soaking wet and forlorn-looking. I invited her in. I made a fire. We sat in front of it, not talking, what was there to say? The river was very low at that time of year—a couple of feet of water—hard to drown yourself. She looked all sheepish. Finally I just had to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Soon we were having passionate sex on the floor in front of the fire."

As volatile as her and Robert's relationship was, Dana rightfully sensed that Kathy was not just a passing fling—she was dangerous to the balance of her household. In fact, she was running her own parallel household in San Francisco. When Robert would show up at Brazil Street, Kathy remembers, she more or less rearranged her life for him. Through a combination of genuine guilelessness and sly manipulation, Robert manages to get himself taken care of. This is not without its price—he's still getting enmeshed in other people's schemes and million-dollar ideas—but the lengths to which people will go to preserve his well-being is extraordinary. Even more extraordinary is that each person, whether a record collector, art dealer, agent, lover, publisher, or friend, usually thinks they, and they alone, are responsible for the entire Crumb superstructure. Ahead of his arrival in San Francisco Kathy Goodell would pick up his checks from publishers and sometimes get advances for expenses, scout for records, and open her apartment to his friends so he could hold court. He was, and still can be, gregarious in groups of fellow travelers, and particularly enjoyed spending time with Spain learning the ins and outs of Marxism and commiserating about women.

Through Kathy, Robert was introduced to a wider spectrum of art in San Francisco. He painted a mural for the local activist group the Mission Rebels, and Kathy introduced Robert to her gallerist, Marian Wintersteen, whose Berkeley Gallery was one of the best for emerging artists in Northern California. Robert's February 1971 solo exhibition of comic art wasn't much of a commercial success, but Wintersteen did it as a favor for Kathy and didn't much mind when Robert gave away drawings at the opening. He had little interest in the art world. He rebuffed numerous requests from the acerbic Swedish artist Öyvind Fahlström, who in 1969 praised Robert as "one of the few truly major American artists today" and soon made an enormous installation based on Robert's "Meatball!" When Kathy took Robert to Los Angeles to meet Crumb fans and renowned sculptors Ken Price and Larry Bell, he was likewise disinterested. The artists treated him as a fellow traveler, but he didn't see it—not the artwork itself, which seemed obtuse and esoteric; not the prices, for which no one could offer a rational explanation; and certainly not the collectors, whom he regarded as little more than ignorant rubes.

The people Robert responded to usually, like Al Dodge and Robert Armstrong, shared his actual interests. Through Kathy, Robert met a young Last Gasp employee named Terry Zwigoff from the Near North Side of Chicago. His father was a menswear salesman and eventually had his own shop on Michigan Avenue downtown. Terry had much the same taste as Robert: Carl Barks, *Little Lulu*, EC, and *Mad*. As kids in the early sixties, Terry and his cousin Sherwin Dunner began hunting for back issues, sometimes taking the El down to the very same magazine store where Marty Pahls and Robert had discovered those pivotal funny animal comic books in March 1966. Graduating from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, Terry and his girlfriend decided to drive west until they hit the ocean. They landed in San Francisco and found a place for sixty dollars a month. He was down to his last fifty bucks when he met Last Gasp's Ron Turner at a party and soon had a job as a shipping clerk at a dollar an hour, which, Zwigoff says, was "even insulting in those days." It was a small enough world of comics appreciators that Terry, who had taught a free class on Carl Barks in Madison, soon met Al Dodge through their mutual friend, Berkeley professor and Barks scholar Donald Ault.

Zwigoff eventually got the bug to edit an anthology comic of his own to promote the relatively nascent cause of animal rights. He'd been influenced by reading philosopher Peter Singer and was helping friends with a documentary about medical research on animals. The footage was so gruesome that it was hard to get anyone to watch the film. Terry had the idea to present that type of material in a more poetic manner, like a comic book. He liked a few underground cartoonists but said, "Crumb was the main guy, and I thought of him when I thought of this idea to do a whole comic book, where you assign each different artist a specific thing to do that might advance this cause that I had."

He asked Ron Turner how to contact Robert, and Turner suggested Kathy, who in turn advised Terry that the only way Crumb would contribute was in exchange for 78s. When Robert was next in town Terry hauled a stack over to him. Robert deemed most of the records junk but found enough to make it worth his while. He told Terry, "I don't want to do somebody else's story. I'll write my own story for your 'be kind to animals' comic book." He was sympathetic to the ideology but was incapable of doing a serious polemic about animal rights.

Robert told Terry he'd contact other cartoonists—Justin Green, Spain, and Art Spiegelman—but whatever Robert told his friends, what Terry eventually got from them had almost no resemblance to his original idea. Spiegelman contributed his earliest attempt at *Maus* as a complete three-page cat-and-mouse story. To help with inspiration, Green sent Spiegelman a couple of amphetamine tablets, which remain taped to the original letter in his files. Zwigoff, thinking it a bit too simplistic, nearly rejected it. The anthology came together and was published by Don Donahue's Apex Novelties in 1972, with a cover by Robert bearing his chosen title, *Funny Aminals*. He also contributed one of the most psychotic stories he ever drew, featuring two predatory cat characters who behead a giant female bird and bat her head around with a stick. After that first meeting, the two became friends. Terry remembered, "We shared a certain sense of humor, a certain dark sensibility. I found him a very funny, smart guy and we had similar musical interests."

Zwigoff left Last Gasp in April 1972 and briefly worked for a small printing company. In 1973, he took a room at Kathy's place on Brazil Street, and then a job at a comic book store in North Beach owned by an LSD-distributor friend of Last Gasp proprietor Ron Turner. He'd been there about six months when the owner took him to lunch and offered him the store. What was the catch? Terry asked. No catch, he was just moving to something else. That "something else" was fleeing from the FBI, which was closing in on his far more lucrative drug operation. Robert painted a new sign for the place, naming it the People's Comics Book Store, and, using a jigsaw, cut plywood shapes of large figures, then painted them with outdoor lacquer: Mr. Natural, the Snoid, Dirty Dog, and an enormous woman who beckoned comic book fans to enter the front door. Kathy, who was actively exhibiting her work in the city but not selling much, briefly became the salesclerk, Zwigoff being a bit too misanthropic for regular public interaction. Being roommates and coworkers, Terry and Kathy also decided to start their own comic book publishing company. Terry had put together *Funny Aminals* himself and worked in both the publishing and retail ends of the business; Kathy had art skills. Why not have them publish some of Robert's comics and make a few thousand dollars each?

The duo formed Golden Gate Publishing Company and, at Terry's behest, released the first collection of Robert's sketchbook drawings, *Artistic Comics*, an anthology of underground-style pinup drawings edited by Jay Lynch called *Turned On Cuties*, and Robert's solo project *The People's Comics*. It was a relatively simple operation: Terry had some ideas, but generally Robert would give them the artwork (in fact he chose the sketchbook pages at random, much to Terry's chagrin, as he had hoped to edit the finest pages together), and they would photograph it and organize the printing. Ron Turner at Last Gasp was, like Print Mint, distributing to head shops, some magazine shops, and boutiques. He would buy an initial two thousand copies, and when those sold, he'd buy another two thousand. Once Golden Gate recouped its costs, it split the money half and half with Robert.

Visits to San Francisco were frenetic and social, which Robert could only sustain for so long. Having spent much of his life alone or sequestered with just his siblings or, more recently, Dana, he would never get used to having too many people around. It requires an effort to put on a public face, to give of himself in a way that may not always feel authentic to a fundamentally introverted person grappling with depression and anxiety daily. He'd head back to Potter Valley, writing to Goodell, "I gotta go off by myself like this in order to vent my psychotic impulses… I mean, I really can't, or shouldn't, be around other people a great percentage of the time… that's the truth… if I'm not alone for a long period… I start getting real crazy and lose touch with the center of myself and start becoming desperate and confused. I notice that whenever I first come back up here, for the first few days when I'm alone in the cabin my mind is just whirling, unwinding like mad."

In February 1972, Robert, Spain, S. Clay Wilson, and Rick Griffin, along with Kathy Goodell, were hanging out at Robert and Suzanne Williams's place in Hollywood, where the cartoonists were at work on the next issue of *Zap.* Ralph Bakshi had moved the production of the *Fritz the Cat* movie to Los Angeles, and by then was nearly done with the film. Robert called Bakshi and asked for a screening for himself and the guys. Bakshi, who had hopes of working with other underground cartoonists, Spain in particular, didn't want the other artists to see the film yet—he was too nervous. Robert described what happened when he arrived to pick up his guest of honor: "All the other guys come storming out of the house, saying 'Okay, let's go,' and come up and like surround me and Ralph Bakshi. Bakshi starts really freaking out. Robert Williams says, 'We're all blood brothers, all of us underground cartoonists, and we've been through a lot together, and this thing means a lot to all of us.' So they get in their cars, and I get in Ralph Bakshi's sports car with him, and we take off, and Bakshi tries to ditch these guys and he can't do it."

The entire group piled into the screening room for a prerelease showing and took their seats in the back row. The Fritz the Cat onscreen was still the self-centered libertine, horny, confident college dropout in search of America, girls, and fun. But it was the Hollywood version—cynical, without Robert's nuanced body language and gently funny satire. His line drawings were laid over expressionist watercolor backgrounds that he found ugly and altogether out of keeping with his precise and elegant sense of color and space. At the end of the film, the *Zap* artists stood up, stone-faced and pissed off. They silently filed out of the theater without even looking at Bakshi. Robert was impressed by this, his first experience of group solidarity. He and Kathy followed them out the door. At the time, Robert felt sorry for Bakshi, felt the animator had gotten in over his head. It was a big jump from superhero cartoons to *Fritz the Cat*. But Robert hated the movie, felt exploited, and upon its release gave widely circulated interviews denouncing it: "They put words into his mouth that I never would have had him say… Probably a lot of people were seeing it out of curiosity. But the movie lets them down." Whatever the original stories meant, the nihilism and chaos of the film was not accurate. Robert's friends were even less charitable. Spain said: "After seeing *Fritz the Cat*, I wouldn't touch an animation company with a ten-foot pole. They really did a job on Crumb. These guys are really Nazi scumbags."

Despite Robert's objections, it's an ambitious, lively film. Not a great one, but an attempt at, as historian and early Crumb critic Michael Barrier writes, "a radical break with the prevailing blandness of feature animation in the early seventies… Fritz seemed to hold the promise of much more ambitious films that would deal directly with adult subject matter, particularly adult emotions, in ways that had been foreclosed to animation for decades."

As planned, it became the first animated film to receive an X rating and became an unlikely hit—it has grossed over one hundred million dollars to date. Bakshi made his name on it and would ultimately carve out his own influential career, but not without some pain. At the time, he said, “I did it out of my love for animation, my love for Robert. Maybe working with Robert was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done. It’s tough working with an idol. You touch a line of his stuff and it hurts a lot of people.” Robert, now working with Michael Krassner and Albert Morse, two junior lawyers contracted through Michael Stepanian, demanded his name be stricken from the *Fritz the Cat* movie posters and promotional material, and by May it was removed. Producer Krantz also agreed to pay Robert an additional ten thousand dollars for the unauthorized use of other Crumb characters, cease any merchandising, and not make a sequel for another three years.

* * *

Being commodified was repugnant to Robert, but he felt defenseless and would often tilt into ambiguity rather than risk confrontation. He just wanted to draw comic books for a living, and he was making a good living doing it—usually about fifteen hundred dollars a month in those first years of the decade. But now Fritz, his character for over a decade, had become a stranger to him. Robert didn’t create characters for other cartoonists—he had to maintain a one-on-one relationship with them in order to feel connected. Once Fritz was mouthing someone else’s words, he was no longer Robert’s. And Fritz wasn’t the only creation finding a life of its own. Mr. Natural and “Keep On Truckin’” were appearing on endless bootlegged products. Everywhere he looked he saw a bastardized version of his work, which estranged him from his own creative impulses. He began to wonder why he should even bother if he was just going to be ripped off: “I sensed that there was heavy social karma cropping up as a result of my wacky drawing skills, a thing I couldn't possibly have anticipated. This karma had a life of its own and it blew back on me quite severely."

There was only one thing to do when faced with existential distress: hit the road. Al Dodge was moving out of his place in Berkeley and had a friend named Rick Barlow who owned the Great Divide Music Store in Aspen. Why not go see him and check out the scene? They drove down to Pasadena to grab Robert Armstrong and piloted a drive-away car all night, pushing the speedometer to one hundred through Nevada. They settled into Rick's store, sleeping on the floor at night and hanging around fiddling with instruments and drawing during the day. Slowly, the trio began developing a string band repertoire rooted in the old-time sound of the Six and Seven-Eighths String Band, which played New Orleans–style jazz on stringed instruments, creating an easygoing, elastic sound. As Armstrong remembered it: "We didn't want to become slavish imitators of older recordings by copying everything note for note. Instead, we tried to capture a certain feel or attitude. We were a string band, but we weren't a hillbilly revival or bluegrass band."

Beyond their musical activity, Robert found a corner in which to draw what would become the comic book *XYZ*, which captures his fractured state of mind. It contains drawing experiments, including "Girls Girls Girls," in which, in a single page, Robert produces a sequence that reduces the female body to just a vagina attached to two legs. Another page, festooned with the legend "copyright 1972 by R. Crumb," is devoted to "Remember Keep On Truckin'?" which features endless iterations, beginning with: "That was a big hit,… well, now, how 'bout 'Keep on Chunkin'?,' 'Keep on Toodlin'?,' 'Keep on Doofin'?" Finishing with a harangue to "Keep on buyin' those 'Keep on Shuckin" posters, patches, t-shirts, cigarette papers, baseball caps, bath mats, beach towels…" On and on. That is followed by "The Many Faces of R. Crumb: An Inside Look at the

Complex Personality of the Great Me!!!,” a two-page offering of various versions of himself, from the “long-suffering patient artist-saint” to the “status-quo booshwah businessman cartoonist” to the “hopelessly neurotic, guilt-ridden cry-baby.”

Armstrong, now a published cartoonist himself, was working on the second issue of *Mickey Rat*, a dissolute cartoon character who began as a joke T-shirt. Ricky Jay, a young magician and R&B fan in residence at the nearby Hotel Jerome, would stop by and chew the fat. “We were the geekiest weirdos in town,” Armstrong says. For the grand sum of fifty dollars, Robert, Al, and Bob were hired to play their first ever gig: a party for the Ski and Rescue Team. The banjo-mandolin-acoustic-guitar combo did not inspire a hootenanny; getting restless, the crowd began shouting, “C’mon, we wanna boogie!” One of them offered the group an extra fifty bucks if they’d pick up the tempo. Luckily, a pianist friend jumped in with some pounding chords, Al hooked his mandolin up to an amplifier to approximate an electric guitar sound, and the rowdies began dancing, thus preventing a thorough ass-kicking.

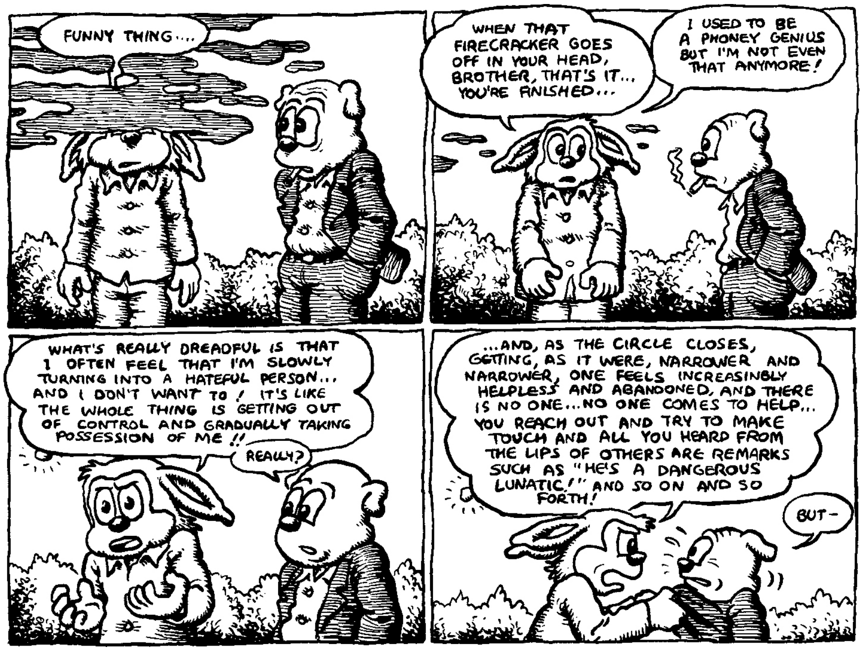
In April, they got a ride to Denver, stayed a week on the cold warehouse floor of head shop supplier Head Imports, and bought a 1954 gold Cadillac El Dorado convertible with a white interior, for three hundred dollars. It was the streamlined machine of their childhood dreams. Much to Al and Bob’s chagrin, Robert flew in Kathy Goodell for the next leg of the trip. The boys’ club was over and Robert and Kathy were, by now, having public shouting matches between heavy make-out sessions in the back seat of the Cadillac. She wanted respect, he wanted to do whatever he wanted. They were simultaneously too hot-tempered and too dreamy to find solid ground from which to build something lasting.

The motley group passed through Chicago, stayed with Jay and Jane Lynch for a few days, and then continued on to Milwaukee, where Denis Kitchen, keen to stay in business with Robert, smuggled the band into a midnight recording session on May 5, 1972, at which they recorded “River Blues” (a take on “Ready for the River” by Neil Moret) and, for the flip side, “Wisconsin Wiggles,” which is loosely based on “Washboard Wiggles” by Tiny Parham. Robert played banjo ukulele, kazoo, guitar, and piano; Bob was on slide guitar, musical saw, and banjo; and Al on mandolin. Robert agreed to fund the venture with an advance against future royalties on his comic books. The Crumb brand was powerful enough that Kitchen agreed to release the music as a 78 on the freshly christened Ordinary Records with a record label and sleeve design by Robert. Motto: “A High Standard of Standardness.” Perfectly dry generic branding at work. The music is upbeat, lilting, and fun, ready for a party a half-century earlier in the days of Robert’s grandfather Joe Hall. Long dismissed as lightweight, and never revived in the various folk waves of the 1950s and ’60s—it, and the records that followed, are anomalous among all the bluster of early 1970s music. And if people didn’t have a 78 player, the boys thought this might win them over to what was, in their opinion, a superior audio format, perhaps even sparking a format revolution back to 78 rpm. But, instead, it sold moderately well locally and in California as a Crumb novelty item.

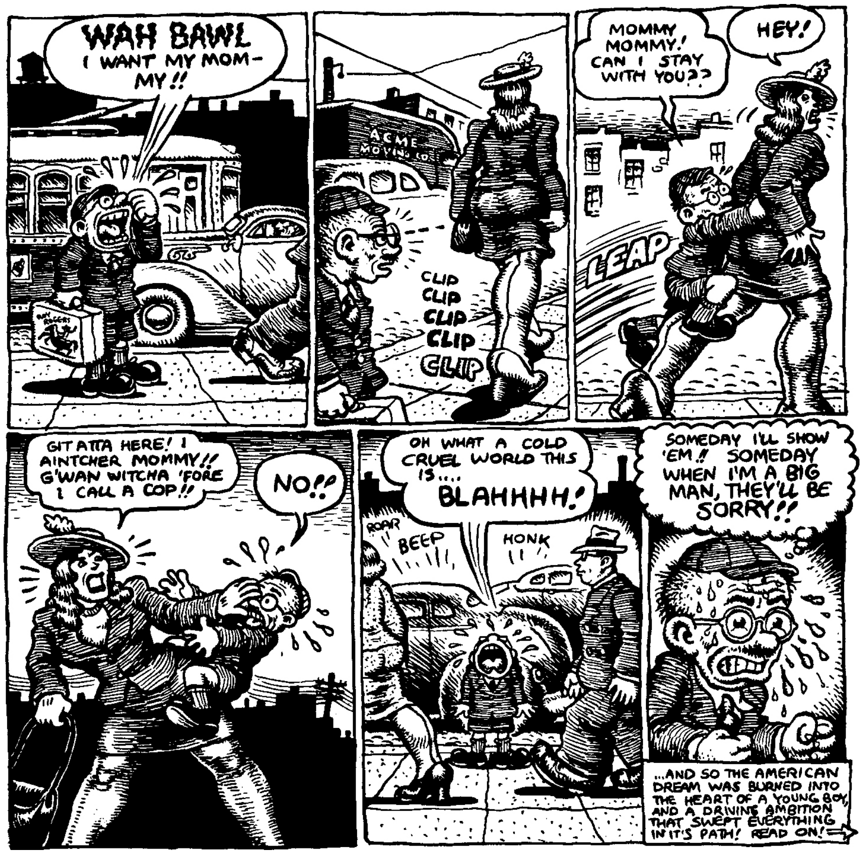
Next, they all drove on to Cleveland and stayed with Harvey Pekar. Robert dropped in on the American Greetings crowd and drew a handful of cards for some quick cash. By now his old boss Tom Wilson had his own hit with the comic strip *Ziggy*, about a bald naif, ghostwritten in part by John Gibbons. After some time with Pekar, Robert, Al, and Bob drove on to New York, with Robert splitting off to take a bus up to Vermont to see an old girlfriend. Left alone, Pekar and Goodell had a brief but tumultuous affair that tested his friendship with Robert. Upon his return from Vermont, Robert, with Al and Bob, drove to Philadelphia and the Crumbs. Al remembers Bea feeding them endless tasty cakes, practically shortcircuiting their brains with sugar. Charles, heavily drugged, was the saddest Robert had ever seen him. The artist memorialized the visit in *XYZ* as “Fuzzy the Bunny in ‘Nut Factory Blues’” by “C. & R. Crumb.” The title was taken from a 1931 blues song, and the story features Charles as Fuzzy and Robert as Donny Dog. The characters from their childhoods are grown now, smoking cigarettes, walking the grounds of Haverford State Hospital, as Charles had just over a year earlier. Fuzzy, speaking Charles’s words, alternates between ecstatic and sedate. He leans into Donny menacingly: “Y’know what all th’ trouble’s about, dontcha? It’s about schizophrenic paranoia! I was once a very clever little rabbit. Then I stopped while you—” Robert processed the tragedy of his brother by wrapping it inside of their creations and telling it as one final “two-man” comic just the way Charles taught him.

Then it was back to New York, where Kathy reunited with the boys. Eventually Robert and Kathy flew back to California in June. Al and Bob spent the rest of the summer playing music and hanging around Aspen, arriving back in Potter Valley (they were, after all, homeless) in September with Rick Barlow and his 1948 DeSoto. Kitchen Sink released thirty thousand copies of *XYZ* that August of 1972, and by 1973, sixty thousand copies were in print. Just a month later, Golden Gate released *The People’s Comics*. Like so many of Robert’s comics, cover and title are a single idea—in this case a capitalist army tank under siege from hidden assailants, including one hand pouring sugar in its gas tank—a message from “the rev,” as people were now calling the coming leftist revolution. The comic book contains “The Confessions of R. Crumb,” a Freudian comedy that begins with a panel of Robert himself at the drawing board, saying, “Oboy, I’m feelin’ devilish today! There’s no telling what sort of twisted perverted drawings I’ll come up with!” After he gives readers a look at his record collection, suddenly a Groucho-type character emerges to offer a tour of “the Wonderful World of Robert

Crumb," which follows Robert from fetus to birth (wearing glasses and a mustache). A newlywed Bea first takes Robert in her arms and then fellates him until Chuck, in marine gear, arrives home. When baby Robert tries to crawl back into Bea's vagina, Chuck tosses him out the door. Robert spots another woman walking down the sidewalk and jumps on her, shouting, "Mommy Mommy! Can I stay with you?" Shaken off the woman's calf, the story ends with a seething little Robert thinking, "Someday I'll show 'em!! Someday when I'm a big man they'll be sorry!!" For all his confessing, the sequence is his most concise demonstration of his fixations: Mommy; powerful women; acceptance; revenge.


FUNNY THING....
WHEN THAT FIRECRACKER GOES OFF IN YOUR HEAD, BROTHER, THAT'S IT... YOU'RE FINISHED...
I USED TO BE A PHONEY GENIUS BUT I'M NOT EVEN THAT ANYMORE!
WHAT'S REALLY DREADFUL IS THAT I OFTEN FEEL THAT I'M SLOWLY TURNING INTO A HATEFUL PERSON... AND I DON'T WANT TO! IT'S LIKE THE WHOLE THING IS GETTING OUT OF CONTROL AND GRADUALLY TAKING POSSESSION OF ME!!
REALLY?
...AND, AS THE CIRCLE CLOSES, GETTING, AS IT WERE, NARROWER AND NARROWER, ONE FEELS INCREASINGLY HELPLESS AND ABANDONED, AND THERE IS NO ONE...NO ONE COMES TO HELP... YOU REACH OUT AND TRY TO MAKE TOUCH AND ALL YOU HEARD FROM THE LIPS OF OTHERS ARE REMARKS SUCH AS "HE'S A DANGEROUS LUNATIC!" AND SO ON AND SO FORTH!
BUT-

"Fuzzy the Bunny in 'Nut Factory Blues,'" *XYZ Comics*, 1972.


WAH BAWL I WANT MY MOM-MY!!
ACME MOVING CO.
CLIP CLIP CLIP CLIP CLIP
MOMMY, MOMMY! CAN I STAY WITH YOU??
HEY!
LEAP
GIT ATTA HERE! I AINTCHER MOMMY!! G'WAN WITCHA 'FORE I CALL A COP!!
NO!!
OH WHAT A COLD CRUEL WORLD THIS IS.... BLAHHHH!
ROAR
BEEP
HONK
SOMEDAY I'LL SHOW 'EM!! SOMEDAY WHEN I'M A BIG MAN, THEY'LL BE SORRY!!
...AND SO THE AMERICAN DREAM WAS BURNED INTO THE HEART OF A YOUNG BOY, AND A DRIVING AMBITION THAT SWEPT EVERYTHING IN IT'S PATH! READ ON!

"The Confessions of R. Crumb," *The People's Comics*, 1972.

The People's Comics closes with Robert's first new Fritz story in four years: the fifteen-page "Fritz the Cat 'Superstar.'" While on the road Al Dodge had suggested, "If you hate him so much, why not kill him?" And so he did just that. Robert imagines his cat as a decadent and abusive drunk, two years past his big film success, loafing around his mansion. He meets with lawyers; frolics with a female friend, an alligator; and meets with producers, including "Ralphy" and "Stevie," drawn as a vulture and a pig, respectively. He hits the Sunset Strip, complains to a groupie, appears on the Johnny Giraffe evening show, and eventually encounters Andrea Ostrich, who begs him to "fuck" her. Fritz humiliates her with assorted tests for four pages until he leaves, chuckling, "Ha ha ha ha ha! Foolish female!" One panel later she stabs him dead with an ice pick, shouting, "Ha yourself smart ass!!" over his dead carcass. A caption, "violence in the media," points to the scene. End of story. End of Fritz. Summarizing where he was in mid-1972, Robert found himself opening one portal to confession and fighting against his own commodification by killing his most popular creation and the avatar of his youth.

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CHAPTER 14

Goldie

Back in San Francisco that summer of 1972, it was particularly hot, and the city was woozy. The Texans at Rip Off Press threw beer-soaked rave-ups, and the Mission District cartoonists had rowdy house parties. The underground scene was peaking even as Robert was beginning to burn out entirely. There was ever more publishing activity happening in California, including the development of a new title, *Wimmen's Comix*, an ongoing collective anthology formed after Trina Robbins published the one-offs *It Ain't Me, Babe* and *All Girl Thrills*.

Wimmen's Comix, released in November 1972, proved that the medium could be as capacious as the men insisted but needn't be hemmed in by macho fixations. Not everyone grew up enraptured by 1950s crime and horror comics or sought revenge against the world for cultural deprivations. These women approached comics as a medium like any other—a place to tell their own stories, in their own ways. The first *Wimmen's Comix* included a story about teenage abortion, one about workplace harassment, and two stories of particular interest to Robert. The first was Robbins's story "Sandy Comes Out." Sandra Crumb and her and Marty Pahls's son, Avery, had lived awhile with Robbins in San Francisco, and they'd become close friends. With Sandy's permission but without her famous last name, Robbins told the story of her roommate's emergence as a lesbian with the clean lines and idealized forms of 1950s romance comics. Upbeat and celebratory, it would become the first widely distributed comic about homosexual romance. The second was twenty-four-year-old Long Island native Aline Kominsky's "Goldie: A Neurotic Woman," a purposefully grotesque autobiographical comic ruminating on her lifelong struggles with her body image, sex, and self-expression. Coming from an art school background, she was disinterested in making her work conform to earlier cartoon styles and modes. Aline refused to aestheticize her form or content, rendering the raw stuff of her self-hatred and bodily fixations as flat forms with a scratchy, anxious lines. The underground allowed, if not exactly welcomed, precisely this kind of convention-breaking drawing.

Robert and Aline began dating while she worked on the story. He was enamored of her humor and sui generis approach to comics. He told her, "Your work is really funny and unique. I don't know why it's this good, but it is." They'd met nearly a year earlier, in November 1971, and had a brief affair. But when Robert left for Colorado with Al and Bob, they'd lost touch. That summer and fall of 1972 he pursued her, and, despite the fact that he had a wife, a girlfriend, and various flings, they became lovers.

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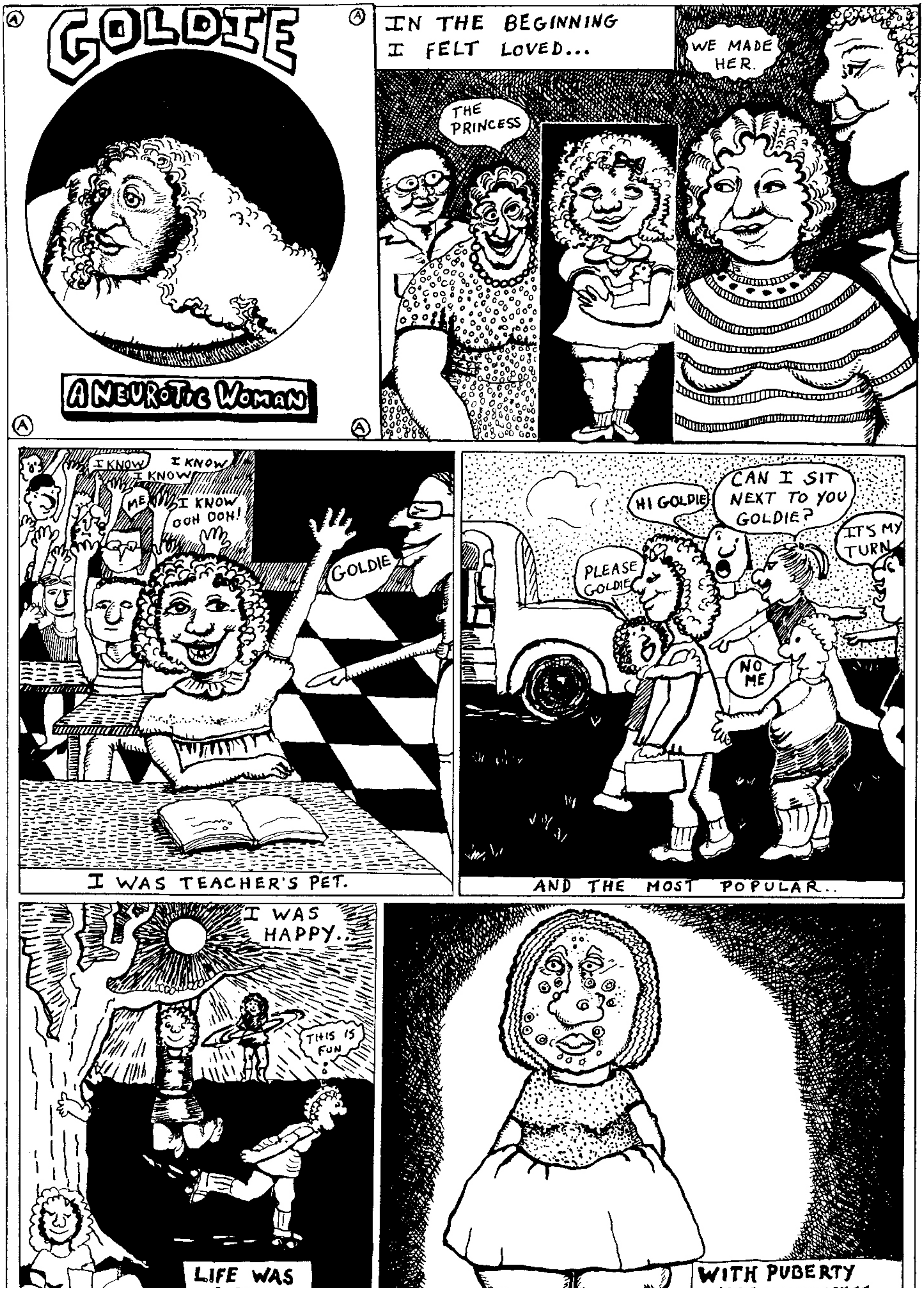
Before she was Aline Kominsky, aspiring cartoonist and liberated woman of San Francisco, she was Aline Ricky Goldsmith, born August 1, 1948, in Long Beach, Long Island, to Arnie Goldsmith and the former Annette Rosenberg. Arnie and Annette emerged from two different New Yorks: Annette's middle-class Belle Harbor, Queens, family was effusive, upward striving, and religiously observant. Arnie, a crude small-time hustler, grew up in working-class Midwood, Brooklyn; his father was a salesman and unsuccessful artist. At a party in Long Beach he met and romanced Annette, then nineteen and looking for an upstanding Jewish man of her own. It was a swift courtship culminating in a ring so small the bride-to-be wept with disappointment. And yet in 1947 they got married anyway, honeymooned in Miami, and set up house in Far Rockaway, Queens, where Arnie, now twenty-three, worked as a mechanic at his new father-in-law's Studebaker-Nash dealership.

The couple's daughter, Aline, arrived a year later, named for a clothing store in Far Rockaway that specialized in the very quintessence of American striving: knockoffs of French fashion. For the first four years of Aline's life the young family lived in Queens, where she was doted on by her maternal grandparents, Fanny and Joe. Their love, humor, food, and Depression-era decor provided a secure familial warmth otherwise absent at home.


GOLDIE
A NEUROTIC WOMAN
IN THE BEGINNING I FELT LOVED...
THE PRINCESS
WE MADE HER.
I KNOW
I KNOW
I KNOW
ME
I KNOW OOH OOH!
GOLDIE
I WAS TEACHER'S PET.
HI GOLDIE
CAN I SIT NEXT TO YOU GOLDIE?
IT'S MY TURN
PLEASE GOLDIE
NO ME
AND THE MOST POPULAR..
I WAS HAPPY..
THIS IS FUN
LIFE WAS
WITH PUBERTY

GOOD
GAME, UGLYNESS, AND GUILT.....
© Kominsky Sept. 1972

Aline Kom ky, Goldi rotic Woman," *Wimmen's Comix* no. 1, 1972.

By the early 1950s Arnie and Annette, like many other working-class Jews, were lured by the new postwar modern ranch houses farther out on Long Island, the Jewish suburban land of striving, occasional prosperity, and profound neurosis. Despite being immediately financially underwater, just before Aline entered kindergarten they moved into a spiffy new tract house in Woodmere, one of the "Five Towns" to which Jews and Italians flocked, seeking the open air and WASP accoutrements unimaginable in lower Manhattan and Brooklyn. For the young Aline, this meant a sudden shift away from her beloved extended family and the blinding realization that she was alone with her parents, who were "immature, reckless and crazy. Horrible psychotics to grow up with."

Woodmere represented a new horizon for the couple, but a new environment couldn't change the darkness that was creeping in. Shortly after settling in suburban heaven, Aline's brother, Alex, arrived. He was born with a large and possibly malignant birthmark on his lower back, which was gradually removed with multiple dry ice treatments. Alex was also dyslexic, though Arnie and Annette, as was typical at the time, just thought he wasn't trying hard enough or, worse, was stupid. He, in turn, grew up deeply withdrawn and afraid of other children, which further humiliated both his parents, causing a cycle of punishment, shame, and rebellion that doomed him from the start.

Life among the upward striving was a struggle. Aline described that time in much the same terms as Robert: "America in the 1950s presented an image of prosperity, efficiency, cleanliness, wholesomeness and order, full of well-adjusted, clean-cut productive stress-free citizens. Thanks to modern conveniences, they enjoyed lots of leisure time for Bar-B-Ques with Mom and Dad, Sis and Bro, Spot the Dog, and a few like-minded friendly happy pals.

For my family, and as it turns out for many others, reality was filled with overwhelming pressure to succeed, stress-induced alcoholism, pill-popping, constant fighting and lots of verbal and sometimes even physical abuse—particularly toward us innocent kids. In fact, for most of my generation, growing up in the 1950s in the US, and perhaps more so on Long Island, was a horrible nightmare. The bizarre visual and cultural world of the 1950s added a surreal aura to the atmosphere."

The Goldsmiths forced Aline into ballet, tennis, and horseback riding, little of which they could afford. Annette struggled with her weight, which she projected onto her daughter, whom she underfed. One happy evening, Aline cadged some French fries from Alex's plate, Annette wrapped her hands around her daughter's neck in an effort to expel the offending carbs, and Arnie, already in a bad mood, upturned the entire table. This was just one of their semiregular physical fights, which occasionally ended in Arnie raping Annette while the children listened in the other room. Arnie bounced from one job to another. He ran the Studebaker-Nash dealership into the ground and then embarked on a series of hustles of dubious quality and reality. He sold the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* door-to-door, semilegal burglar alarms under the glorious company name BARG ("grab" spelled backward), then aluminum siding, while Annette was selling advertising space in the Yellow Pages. Arnie's sleazy friends hovered around, and men sometimes came and went in the night.

At age eight, Aline, like Robert, realized she was entirely alienated from the people around her. How had she, a sensitive, loving soul, wound up in the midst of all this materialism and violence? Reading and drawing saved her. She could copy famous paintings, for which adults would compliment her and pay cash. She somehow grew up an artistic (frowned upon unless money-winning), athletic (ditto), and bright (Arnie rewarded her straight A's with cash) adolescent. And she loved dolls and clothes—things that offered a way to both disguise herself and fit in, to enact a fantasy of normalcy amid the chaos at home.

As she entered adolescence, normal and abnormal complications ensued. Aline gradually, as she put it, thickened. At fourteen she began a teenage heavy-petting romance with an older boy named Al, with whom she felt certain she was in love. After they had sex for the first time, she never heard from him again. Through the gossip mill, the word was that she was a "whore." Her initiation into adult sexuality was, unfortunately, consistent with her life experiences and worldview up to that point. On the one hand, she needed to be quiet and submissive to avoid disapproval and violence, but on the other, she needed to loudly and publicly achieve to get love; old-world Jewish culture was a comfort, but everyone around her was, quite literally, trying to erase it (she often joked that she was the only girl in her class who didn't get a nose job). And then there was her body. She wrote: "Fat is so obviously the striving woman's obsessive disease, perhaps it peaks in Jewish culture, 'Eat, Eat, Eat but don't gain any weight!' Keep that salable product, that body, gawgeous!" These "lessons" became a recipe that resulted in something not so dissimilar to Robert's experience: she developed a profound self-loathing combined with a ferocious need to preserve her internal life against any intruders—Arnie, Annette, anyone. It took years for Aline to develop a sense of herself as an artist and a separate human being. She was, for so long, defined by others, just trying to escape to the next scene, the next way she might find herself.

And as Robert did, she found some liberation in art. Aside from painting, she was growing ever more interested in storytelling. Her grandpa Joe was a "huge wannabe comedian," and she recalled, "He took me to see every comic in New York: Jackie Mason, Alan King, Jose Bishop, Henny Youngman, Don Rickles. My humor is directly related to that in terms of storytelling: self-deprecating, self-referential, very autobiographical stuff about the family, about daily life, that sort of thing. Also Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller: They were the only two women comics that I was interested in." She was getting, as she'd say, "cultured." In 1963, Aline began taking the Long Island Rail Road to Manhattan to explore the Museum of Modern Art and Greenwich Village, where the bright pinks and linoleum yellows of Woodmere disappeared into the beatnik palette of olive, tan, and black. Soon, at age sixteen, she began sneaking out of the house at night and driving her '59 Chrysler to the East Village. She spotted a Fugs poster, grabbed it, and became obsessed with the bards of "Slum Goddess" and "I Couldn't Get High."

She graduated from Lawrence High School in June 1966, got a clerical job at the JFK duty-free shop, and partied her way through the summer. Aline walked around barefoot, let her hair revert to its natural frizz, stopped shaving her legs, and generally adopted the flower power lifestyle. She spent countless nights at the Players Theatre on MacDougal Street worshipping the Fugs, dropping acid, and popping speed to stay awake. One fine summer day Aline took a dose on her way to an outdoor event in Central Park: "I started getting high. And I looked around the subway car and I saw three or four other people that were also getting high. We all picked up on each other because that was what it was like then. So we all got off at Central Park. I ended up spending a month with those people. And that's what it was like then. Our spirits connected, we had an out-of-body experience and then we just went with it." She sought out her tribe, made a new community, and was constitutionally unable to ever return to Woodmere.

When September rolled around it was time to report for her freshman year at SUNY New Paltz in the Hudson Valley of New York State. Midway through a semester of misery stuck in a dormitory with the very middle-class kids she'd hoped to escape, Aline realized she was pregnant. She vamoosed out her dorm room window back to Woodmere: "I went home and was planning on telling them but they didn’t notice and I couldn’t get the words out. So I ran away and hid in a $35 a month flat in the Lower East Side. I stalled for two months and then went to the closest hospital. I was eight months pregnant and had not seen a doctor. I went to the Beth Israel Clinic on 14th and 1st Avenue. I knew they’d look up my cunt and I’d never been to a gynecologist before, nor had my mother ever told me anything about what they do or about my parts. I was most terrified. I told my story to a social worker at the hospital (after waiting two hours, eight months pregnant). She said I was too far along and they couldn’t take me… They told me where to go to arrange for adoption of the kid.” She found a Jewish adoption agency happy to have a young, educated mother and offered a stipend and weekly psychiatric sessions. Her parents eventually noticed her silence; Arnie tracked her down in the Lower East Side and, after some initial harsh words, admitted he respected his daughter for taking care of the “problem” herself. She gave birth to a healthy baby boy in June 1967. He was immediately whisked away.

Aline enrolled at the prestigious art, architecture, and engineering college Cooper Union in September and worked at Merrill Lynch to support herself. She soon fell in love with a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn named Carl Kominsky. He’d returned to New York after three semesters at the University of Arizona. They did all the happy hippie things together: marching on the Pentagon, doing LSD at Timothy Leary’s Millbrook compound, and attempting to go, but never making it, to Woodstock on a motorcycle. Meanwhile, Arnie was suffering from an ailment he mostly ignored. He was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in late 1967 and died in March 1968 at the age of forty-three. The family was stuck between horror and elation. A doctor prescribed Valium and a vacation to Miami for mother, daughter, and son. Annette refused to return to the Woodmere home, forcing Aline herself to pack up and sell the contents of the place. Alex, who had developed a drug habit by stealing Annette’s barbiturates, was off at a reform school in upstate New York. In under a year, during a time when all the societal rules were being tossed into the air, Aline had given birth, lost her father, and watched her family disintegrate. If nothing else, she learned that she could remake herself and her world if necessary.

Annette, who was palpably relieved to be single, was only thirty-eight and ready to begin *her* new life. Her kids? They were grown, more or less. She wanted to embrace life as a liberated woman, perhaps with her daughter as a roommate. Aline was much less enthusiastic about double-dating with her mother. She was living with Carl on Tenth Street between Avenues A and B, just steps from where Robert and Dana had resided a few years before. Kominsky remembers, "[Annette] made enormous emotional demands on Aline, and Aline was under enormous pressure to move in with her mom. She begged me to marry her, and I did [in the fall of 1968]. I was nineteen. Her family life was very bad. The fact that she wasn't damaged for life is a testament to her buoyancy. We had no idea what being married meant. Aline was far more liberated than I was."

In 1969, a year after they married, Carl, who was never much for the city, and Aline, who'd just been mugged on the street by a stranger and emotionally mugged by Annette, decided to head out to Tucson so they could start fresh and continue their undergraduate degrees at the University of Arizona. In 1969, they moved into a cute two-story adobe near campus. Annette, herself suddenly newly married to a sweet Jewish man and done with parenting, shipped out Alex soon after, and he took up residence in the house. It was a bit cramped for a young married couple and one ne'er-do-well, but Kominsky remembered, "Arizona gave Aline a place to thrive. Tucson was especially rich in spirituality, culture, and art. Aline never backed away—she was pretty fearless." She shone in the art department, which in those days was populated by beer-swilling male artists playing cowboy. Subject and material experimentation was encouraged, as was peyote, which opened her mind to the shimmering desert, which she explored on her little motorcycle. She also fell in lust with a real local cowboy named Ray Eddington, who was possessed of sullen good looks, mechanical know-how, and a serious drinking problem. It took a few months, but after a few too many blowout fights, Aline broke it off. By the end of 1970 her marriage to Carl was a bust. Infidelities aside, they were too young and far too different to make it work.

But Aline wanted to finish out her degree, so she rented an old converted city bus outfitted with a tin roof, a kitchen, and a little cactus garden in the back. There was a sizable hole in the fence between the bus and the little house in front inhabited by another Long Island Jew named Betsy Klein, who was part of a small contingent of New York exiles in town. Klein was a Skidmore graduate and a Lower East Side insider. In 1965, she was doing stenography for the New York State Bar Association when a friend from Hempstead told her about the Fugs, then the strangest, most jubilant experience around. "I went and saw them, and thought, 'They never told me about this at Skidmore!'" She soon found the Peace Eye bookstore and "there was Ed Sanders humping his mimeograph machine, imprecating it to work. Out of the back comes a bearded monster, and he smiles and says, 'Hey, why don't you come back here and sit on my face?' That was Ken [Weaver, drummer for the Fugs]." A romance was born. Ken and Betsy fell in love, and Betsy was quickly embedded in the Lower East Side scene that the *East Village Other* breathlessly chronicled.

In 1968, heiress Peggy Mellon Hitchcock moved out to Tucson, taking *EVO* editor Walter Bowart with her. They were interested in the healing properties of the land, which was recommended to them by one of the many semi-mysterious gurus of the time, "Mana," a.k.a. Immanuel Trujillo, founder of the Peyote Way Church of God. Peggy was wealthy and experienced. She was one of the early volunteers for

Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert's LSD experiments and convinced her brothers to give Millbrook to the psychonauts. Now Bowart was publishing metaphysical books under his Mellon-funded imprint, Omen Press. Betsy, fed up with both New York and Weaver, was advised by Mana to seek the desert and promised an editing job by Bowart, so she soon followed, bolstering the hip enclave and drawing more urban exiles into her orbit. Aline had met Betsy before at Fugs shows—in 1966 her new friend had been the forbidding "aren't you a bit too young for this" lady protecting Weaver from the panting groupie.

But now Betsy and Aline got to spending time together, bonding over New York, romance, and the desert. Betsy would buy fifty-pound bags of wheat berries and make bread; when it was too hot they would sleep on the roof of her casita. Betsy got Aline a layout job at Omen Press. Soon enough, Weaver moved into a tiny apartment set into an old water tower just behind Betsy's house. Weaver did odd jobs for Mellon, and he and Aline had a brief affair, finally consummating her fangirl dreams. He also turned her on to underground comics. She was particularly intrigued by Justin Green's autobiographical stories of his alter ego, the tortured half-Catholic/half-Jewish Binky Brown, as published in the comic book anthologies *Yellow Dog* and *Laugh in the Dark*. Aside from his willingness to abjectly expose himself, Green's drawings, unlike, say, Robert's, were aspirational. He was unpolished, learning in public—his was a standard Aline could reach for. She'd always kept notebooks of her written and drawn observations but hadn't been interested in comics as a kid. Encouraged by a professor, she started injecting observational humor and autobiography into her artwork—she just wasn't quite sure where to go with it.

Aline graduated with her BFA in June 1971. Though she'd been a star in the department she was skeptical about what to do next. She was accepted into the University of Arizona MFA program, which came with a cushy teaching job and salary, but before taking the leap, Aline paused: “I just saw the scene there as being so decadent. I thought I’d end up making some arty version of comics, make it cool in the art world, and I’d be an alcoholic, and sleep with younger art students. I could see how I could be admired and get a lot of attention. But I also saw that I had some compelling need to do something more real, and really not care what people thought of it, and not be judged by those standards. I was already very skeptical of the whole fine arts thing from those Cooper Union days. I knew you had to get a shtick, and it’s got to hit. And, if that doesn’t, you better find another one. And that’s what I grew up with on Long Island, it’s just a different version of it. My art thrived when I was in high school because it was my only comfort, the only thing that was real to me. I didn’t want to push my art, which was my comfort and my reality, into this thing that was part of that world that I grew up in—it would’ve been death for me. So, I was lucky I escaped that by the skin of my teeth really.”

The comics had planted a seed in her mind, given her a sense that she could have a voice in that medium. They also planted the seed of San Francisco. Late that summer of 1971, Spain and Kim Deitch came to Tucson to visit their old pal Weaver. “They told me I looked exactly like an R. Crumb character, and they said, we have to introduce you to Crumb, he’s going to flip out when he meets you. You look like Dale Steinberger, the Jewish Cowgirl, and Honey Bunch Kaminski combined!” That seemed at least somewhat promising. Maybe she could get to the city and meet Justin Green. Maybe there was a place for this work she was developing. And if she didn’t get to San Francisco soon, she’d never leave Arizona. In October 1971, Aline, now twenty-three, talked Betsy into moving with her. “Betsy was getting burned out being in Tucson. We decided we’d both slept with every interesting man that we were going to sleep with there, and she got tired of working at Omen Press, so we went together. We made a caravan. She took her old Mercedes, I took my Volkswagen, and we drove to San Francisco." They stayed in the Diamond Street apartment Dana and Robert had handed off to Spain, then at Rick Griffin's place.

That month Robert was in town staying with Kathy Goodell at her Brazil Street apartment. As per usual when Robert was in residence, Kathy hosted a gathering of cartoonists and friends—Griffin, Al Dodge, Gilbert Shelton, Lora Fountain, and Bill Griffith, among others. Spain and Dominic brought Aline over. She wore a red micro-miniskirt and brown and white boots. "I met Robert and he looked at me and went, 'You have cute knees.' He had offered to show me around the house and we arrived upstairs. There, he started to grope me and play with my face in a most unusual and exciting manner. I became totally absorbed in his strangeness and wanted to continue, but just as he was climbing up on my butt to take his first of thousands of 'horsey rides,' his girlfriend Kathy showed up hands on hips… I apologized and quickly left the room."

Whatever was happening between them needed, for the moment, to be platonic. Robert was married, had a girlfriend and a kid, and his life was chaos. So Aline went about her business as a single woman. She and Betsy moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Fisherman's Wharf, near Ghirardelli Square, and both took jobs at the Glide Memorial Church Publication Company, a nondenominational organization devoted to social justice and spiritual study. They published a bit of everything—poetry, comics, and health books. While working at Glide, Aline hung out with various underground cartoonists, picking up some craft and publishing tips from Glide cartoonist Dan O'Neill, Spain, and a short-lived boyfriend, the beloved cartoonist Willy Murphy. In mid-November, Robert ran into Aline again at a party at the Rip Off Press, now a cartooning studio, print shop, and mail-order business where the Texans guzzled beer and smoked a lot of pot. The smoky, high-spirited parties were the best around. Robert spent the night with Aline at her place on North Point Street. They had sex, they talked, and he drew luminous portraits of her. Their meetings grew more frequent, though one night Aline's brother, Alex, and her old cowboy boyfriend Ray showed up to surprise her. Ray intended to take Aline back to Arizona with him, but Aline told him she was with Robert now and staying put. The next day, she went off to work and left Robert alone at her place. Alex and Ray showed up, and finding Robert there, Ray put a revolver to Robert's head, giggling as he pulled back the hammer. Robert remembers saying, "Well, if you're gonna do it, get it over with." Ray lowered the gun, saying, "Nah, just kidding," and laughed. He was shot dead in Arizona a few years later.

Aline and Betsy decided to check out Potter Valley shortly after this confrontation. They dropped acid once they arrived at the Edenic, if muddy, compound, and as the trip came on, the mess of Robert's life became clear. Robert remembers, "I saw the look in her eyes as she took in the scene there. She saw it all in an instant. We were all naked to her. It was very embarrassing." It was one thing to fool around with the Robert Crumb of San Francisco; it was another to encounter Dana, Jesse, Paul Seidman, and the various pets and farm animals floating around Eel River Road. It was, Aline realized, a very "sticky web" she needed to avoid. "I really liked him. I liked him so much that it freaked me out, because I was having so much fun I really didn't want to be attached to anybody at all. I was the most promiscuous I ever was in my life then. It was like I was living a life that I dreamed of living ever since I was in high school, and finally I had it." So they called it off, and Robert, depressed by the *Fritz the Cat* screening, hit the road in early 1972.

When they met again in July, Aline told him she'd been hurt by how cavalier he'd been with her feelings. Tough as she was, simply not hearing from Robert for over six months didn't feel great. They went to see a Bruce Lee movie and returned to Aline's apartment.

They talked, made love, and something sparked that would burn for another half century.

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PART IV

1972–1992

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CHAPTER 15

City and Country

After a few months of seeing each other in San Francisco, in the fall of 1972 Aline began visiting Robert in Potter Valley. At first, Dana liked Aline just fine. She didn't see her as a threat and she was a relatively calm presence in the city and the country. She would drive up, stay with Robert in his cabin, help out in the garden, and look after Jesse and a new addition to the family, Dana and Paul Seidman's child, Adam Crumb. They gave Adam Robert's last name to preserve some sense of propriety for Dana's parents, and Robert even signed the birth certificate. Dana's old boyfriend Paul Cohen was also living there with his wife, Sherry. As a group, they made some improvements to the compound, adding an automatic dishwasher to the main house and an aboveground pool nearby.

The web of relationships, even if sticky, was copacetic enough that Aline invited Dana and Paul Seidman to stay at her and Betsy's place on North Point Street whenever they were in San Francisco. Dana was especially impressed by the clean and tidy apartment—a pleasant change from up north. As Aline said, "I'm a nice Jewish girl, I can't live in filth, you know?"

Soon Ken Weaver, also bored of Tucson, fleeing a disastrous marriage, decided to head up to San Francisco, stay at the apartment on North Point Street, and let Betsy and Aline take care of him. He kept them and their visitors entertained with hilarious imitations of the people he grew up with in Texas. Weaver was both a smart bohemian and traditionally masculine, which made him enormously appealing to Dana, who soon met and fell for him. Her relationship with Seidman winding down, she invited Weaver to bring a trailer up to Potter Valley and join the circus. Aline, too, got the invitation. Betsy was moving out, and besides, Aline wanted to live rent-free (in exchange for household labor) for a while so she could devote herself to her comics. She bought an old twenty-nine-foot silver trailer and parked it next to Robert's cabin. There were now two houses, a shed, and two trailers on the property. The area around the dwellings was mostly packed dirt with a layer of straw to keep the surface dry; all around were remnants of chopped firewood, engine and appliance parts, Jesse's toys, and an assortment of vehicles. But the interior of Aline's new domicile was, like her apartment, neat, orderly, and cozy.

Racing between Kathy's place in San Francisco, squeezing in trysts with Aline, and presiding over Potter Valley, Robert had published one hundred pages in 1972. As 1973 approached Robert was feeling creatively "dry as a bone," and yet it would be his highest-earning year yet: $120,000, a small fortune for those times. Robert himself was barely aware of the funds coming in. He was, he's said, a "child in matters of money." Most of the money came from settlements and licensing fees for "Keep On Truckin'" merchandise, aggressively pursued by his lawyer Albert Morse. Wearing a long beard and Savile Row suits, and driving a baby-blue Porsche, Morse arrived in San Francisco in 1969 and ensconced himself in nearby Sausalito's louche scene of sex, leisure, and poetry. He knew Robert's lawyer Michael Stepanian from law school, started with him as an investigator, and passed the bar exam in 1971. Sitting in a thronelike chair across from a cherrywood rolltop desk, Morse worked out of an office in Stepanian and Brian Rohan's Victorian. Through his older associates he fell in with the underground cartoonists. He liked their freewheeling energy and sensed an opportunity to find a focus for his own bohemian sensibility. Their contracts and licensing deals were small potatoes for his more experienced colleagues but a domain of his own for Morse.

For Robert, he asked for royalty statements from all of his publishers, negotiated contracts, and, most of all, chased after the innumerable “Keep On Truckin’” bootlegs. The scale of legal and illegal merchandising from Robert’s work was unprecedented in the counterculture, where the Underground Press Syndicate “what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine” mindset held sway. But this was now the 1970s, and unlike the underground papers that just skated by, numerous companies big and small were making a lot of money from Robert. Why shouldn’t he get a taste? Morse told a reporter: “Robert doesn’t really want to have his characters on every little piece of shit… He has sold a few licenses for T-shirts and patches for financial reasons, but he wouldn’t sell licenses to most people. It’s a control thing. If people steal, they should pay.” Michael Krassner, another young associate working with Stepanian and Rohan, brought his nuts-and-bolts legal mind to Morse’s bohemian schmooze. They employed a revolving door of young researchers who spent their days perusing trade shows at Moscone Center, head shops, department stores, and mail-order catalogs for Crumb images on a wide variety of decals, plastic pillows, emblems, posters, T-shirts, transfers, patches, and car mats.

If the product wasn’t licensed, Krassner would write a letter and then either he or Morse would get on the phone, negotiate a settlement for back royalties, and then sometimes make the bootlegger a legal licensee by charging a standard advance payment of $2,500 for a one-year license against royalties. They worked long days collecting money from everyone from Macy’s to J. C. Penney (a $10,000 check) to Personality Posters to much smaller operations like Electric Yoyo. Even the College Republican National Committee used the “Truckin’” characters. Morse no doubt endeared himself to the *New York Times* by extracting $1,000 after a 1972 magazine profile ran without copyright notices under Robert’s images. By 1975, Krassner and Morse had sent one hundred thirty-four cease-anddesist letters and filed seventy-one copyright-infringement lawsuits, thirty-seven of which were settled for a total of $130,301. They also collected $25,940 from twenty nonlitigation monetary settlements. Morse kept the licensing funds in an account that he administered with Dana and Robert.

Robert spent little of the “Truckin’” money himself. He didn’t care about clothes, food, or savings. He preferred to barter artwork for the only objects he coveted: records. But the income he generated made his larger world possible. It enabled his travel and contributed to Kathy’s costs at Brazil Street, and went to the upkeep of Potter Valley, to the children, and, as one of Dana’s closest friends remembers, to Dana’s compulsive spending—she loved to buy rugs, turquoise jewelry, and knickknacks that helped make her house a home. They both were, in their own ways, living the boho ideal. But in a mistake that would haunt the couple, they were so distracted by their households and compulsions that they neglected to pay taxes. Morse sent Robert and Dana an annual income statement and urged him to file his taxes, but Robert either thought Dana was handling it, misunderstood the process, or simply forgot. It wasn’t Morse’s job.

* * *

Robert’s personal life was no less complicated. What had been casual between Robert and Aline was slowly turning into something more. Aline was in love with Robert, but he refused to commit even to an open relationship and could be, as he was with Kathy, cruel. Aline remembered, “He was really an amazingly giving, loving, affectionate person. I was always deprived of that kind of attention before. But he was real immoral in the sense that he’d go from one to the other. When he was with you, he could really focus completely on you. You seemed like the only important thing in the universe, but he did that with a lot of people. He made me feel really good, but then of course

I was jealous because he'd do that with other people, too." He couldn't decide between the women and didn't think he should have to. He refused to be pinned down in business or relationships—keeping it open, no matter the cost to the people around him, gave him the balance he craved.

Aline wasn't interested in putting up with it forever. After catching Robert lying about his location, she split for the city, leaving a note: "In general, you treat me like shit and make life hard for me. That's really not true. It's more like how I allow myself to be affected by you. You're a rotten bastard low life for taking so much of me and not wanting to give anything yourself. It's true you always warn me not to 'stick like glue' but you're always willing to use me when it's convenient. Because you always make people around you compete for your attention [...] you never get to see my hostile rotten side. I have to be nice to you so you'll like me the 'best,' so I take my hostility out on other people. I don't know if I'm capable of changing my way of relating to you but at least I've said what I think. Anyway I'm going to the city for awhile."

Aline eventually returned to Potter Valley but felt increasingly unsatisfied with the arrangement, a feeling that was exacerbated in late 1972 when an old lover of Robert's arrived with all her worldly possessions, ready to move right in. Aline clocked the move from her trailer, ran out the door in her platform shoes, tripped, and broke her foot in six places. Robert had Aline's brother, Alex, now also living at the Potter Valley compound, rushed the interloper to the bus station in Ukiah, and Aline spent the rest of the winter with her foot in a cast.

To while away the long, cold days, Robert suggested he and Aline work on a comic book together, just as he and Charles used to do. Her comic book stories of anxiety, sex, and self-hatred were getting more self-assured. She was especially inspired by the spring 1972 publication of Justin Green's *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*.

In excruciating, masochistic detail, Green chronicled the obsessive-compulsive neurosis and Catholic visions that twisted every aspect of his life, from descending the stairs to masturbation to education. Among his peers, Green was considered a genius. Aline in turn inspired Robert to go deeper in exposing himself. Together they made stories out of their own hang-ups, pushed the medium, and offered a new, cringe twist on their comics. On the comic book page, the contrast between Robert's forever rounded figures and her own flat line drawings was striking, as was their dialogue, responding to each other in real time, on the page, each inhabiting a slightly exaggerated version of themselves in a comic book duet that first tracked their relationship, then their separate lives, and then, in a fine twist, the arrival of aliens. They did it, just as the brothers had, for their own entertainment, with no thought of publishing it.

In 1973 and '74, Robert was more likely to be playing with the band than drawing comics. Cartooning, which he'd done first under Charles's heavy influence, then as an inspired artistic activity, had become an obligation, a task fraught with adult consequences. In June 1973 he finished his final new comic book until 1979—the somewhat desultory *Black and White Comics*. Hastily drawn with a Rapidograph and a crow quill, much of it rehashes his themes of the past, including "R. Crumb Versus the Sisterhood," a ten-page encounter with "feminists" that leads off with "R. Crumb" tricking a "Miz Judy" into smelling his lapel flower and getting a squirt of ink on her face. It crosses into self-parody, with Robert playing the prankish creepy male and "Judy" the humorless militant. Robert understood that one couldn't act out like that in real life and knew that the "Sisterhood" had valid points that every "Whiteman" from Chuck on down to Robert had to deal with, but he used comics to let loose his id, hoping readers would see the humor in his exaggerations.

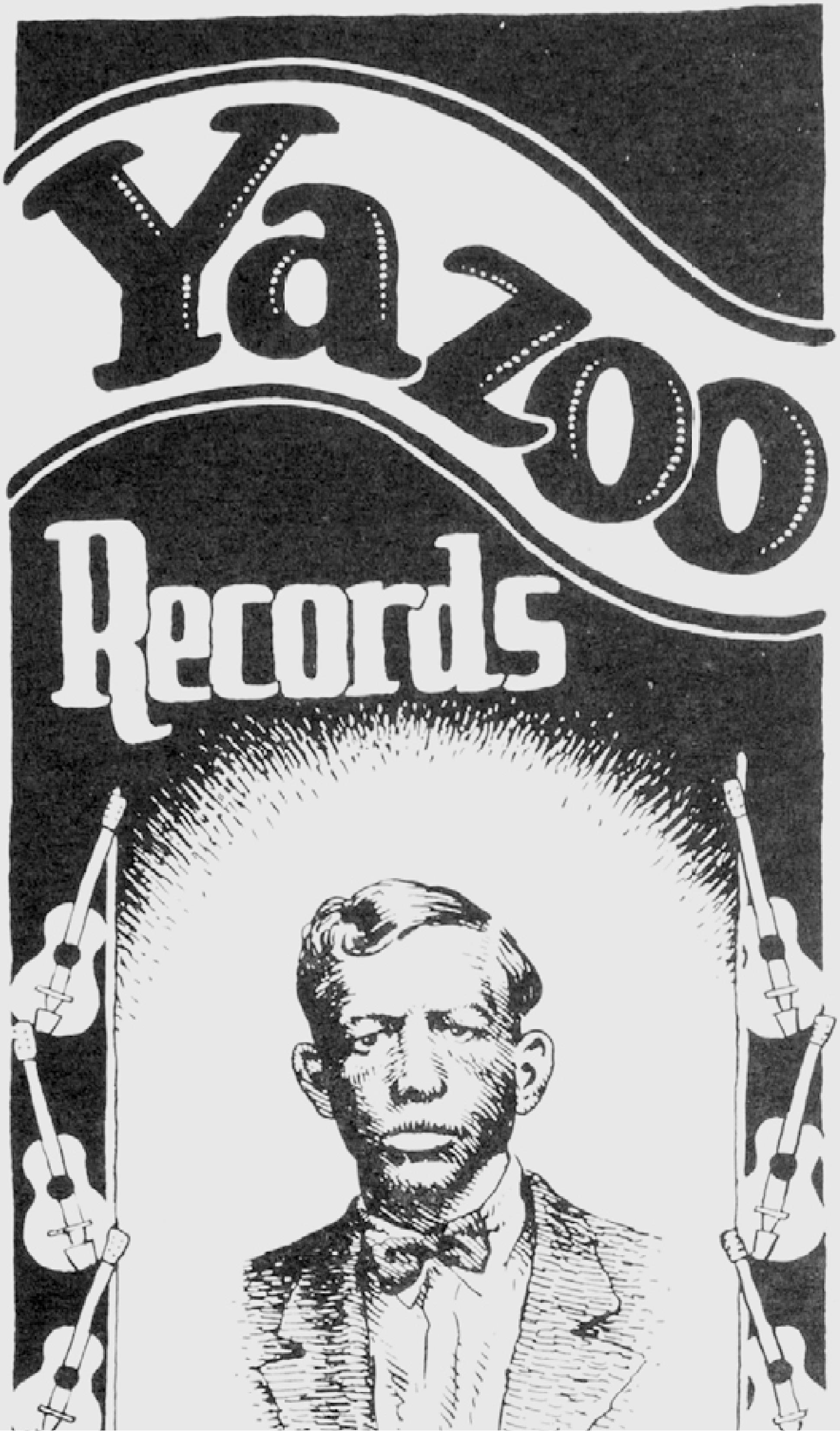
Away from comics, the band would busk at Fisherman's Wharf, selling their record for a buck and having a good old time. And that was exactly the point: a good time. Armstrong, Dodge, and Robert had made their official debut as R. Crumb and His Keep-On-Truckin' Orchestra on New Year's Eve 1972 at San Francisco's Magic Cellar, sandwiched between two magic acts. The three friends sat underneath a "Happy New Year" banner, Armstrong, on accordion, saw, and guitar, wearing a conical party hat; Dodge in the center on mandolin; and Robert in his fedora, playing banjo, all watching each other for cues.

If the Crumb name didn't bring a crowd, the invocation of his famous comic surely would. *Rolling Stone*, still a local magazine, covered the debut performance, and *Creem* reviewed their record. The group wasn't playing anything remotely hip, especially given Robert's counterculture cred, but they enjoyed losing themselves in the moment. "Audiences weren't sure how to classify what we did," Armstrong says, "and often called what we played old cartoon music."

Talking to Charley Patton and Skip James biographer Stephen Calt, Robert said, "Music's recreation. I think what ruined music is when it got too commercial: all those hillbilly bands all started out just for family recreation… Now all the bands just shoot for the top and that's it." He was practicing banjo two hours a day and admitted, "Sure I'd like to be a success playin' music, but success doesn't mean to be this goddamn superstar… I don't wanna be no fucking music superstar, and that isn't gonna happen with our band… It's not hyped enough." If the band actually "made it," Robert said, he'd "probably quit playing and go back to drawing, or go into shoe repairing, or something… The thing I'm suspicious about is that it seems that anything you end up doing for a living becomes a drag somehow."

The band booked some paying gigs, including one that renamed the group: having agreed to play a tony wedding gig, the three needed to buy some cut-rate formal attire in a hurry. Thus was born R. Crumb and His Cheap Suit Serenaders.

In playing and researching music, Robert could lose himself in the moment, extract his consciousness from the brand he'd become. Impressed by his knowledge, Stephen Calt introduced Robert and the band to Nick Perls, one of the original members of the "Blues Mafia," a group of archivists and collectors, including Calt, who in the 1960s sought out old records and just as often the musicians themselves, bringing the likes of Skip James out of the prewar past to present-day folk festival stages. Perls came from a family of preeminent modern art dealers. And though he wasn't interested in Pablo Picasso or Alexander Calder, he understood and practiced the value of connoisseurship. He spent his sizable trust fund on a beautiful residence in Greenwich Village, countless rare blues 78s, and his own label, Yazoo, which he founded in 1967 to reissue early blues, country, and jazz music.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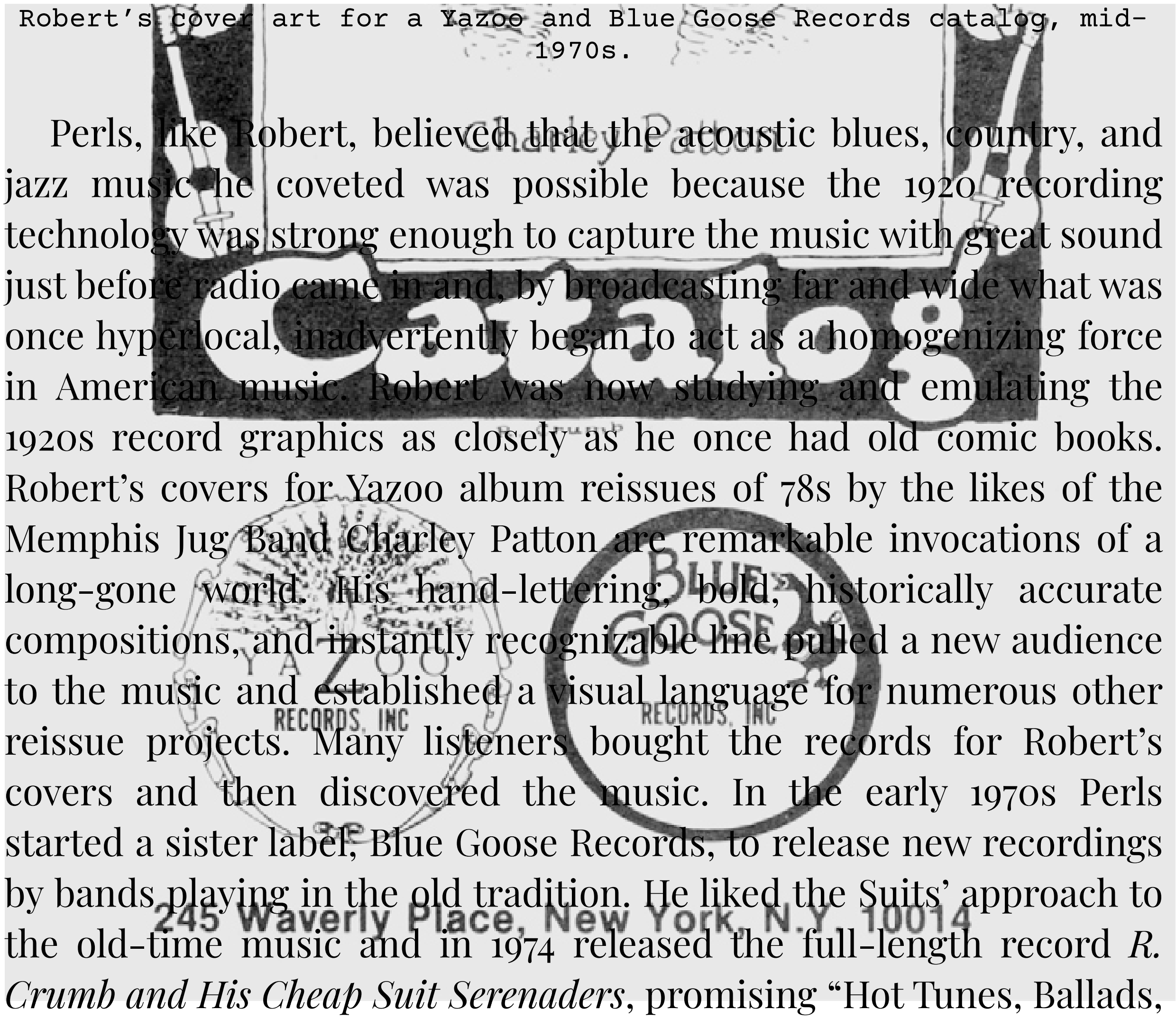
Records



Robert's cover art for a Yazoo and Blue Goose Records catalog, mid-1970s.

Perls, like Robert, believed that the acoustic blues, country, and jazz music he coveted was possible because the 1920 recording technology was strong enough to capture the music with great sound just before radio came in and, by broadcasting far and wide what was once hyperlocal, inadvertently began to act as a homogenizing force in American music. Robert was now studying and emulating the 1920s record graphics as closely as he once had old comic books. Robert's covers for Yazoo album reissues of 78s by the likes of the Memphis Jug Band Charley Patton are remarkable invocations of a long-gone world. His hand-lettering, bold, historically accurate compositions, and instantly recognizable line pulled a new audience to the music and established a visual language for numerous other reissue projects. Many listeners bought the records for Robert's covers and then discovered the music. In the early 1970s Perls started a sister label, Blue Goose Records, to release new recordings by bands playing in the old tradition. He liked the Suits' approach to the old-time music and in 1974 released the full-length record *R. Crumb and His Cheap Suit Serenaders*, promising "Hot Tunes, Ballads, Blues, Waltzes, Old Standards," which it delivered in fine, jaunty form.

Terry Zwigoff, meanwhile, looked on with envy: "In 1974 I remember I'd be stuck in that comic book store as the proprietor, with these little kids coming in asking to see *Spider-Man* number 38 or whatever. And Al, and Bob, and Crumb would come in just to hang out because they were on a goof, like playing music on the street for fun. And I'd think, 'Oh God, I so want to go with those guys and get out of the store. They're all having fun.'" One day, a friend Terry used to park cars with (hippie name "Paca Puppy Bones") in downtown Chicago came in talking about how much he loved comics and had always wanted a store of his own. Terry tossed him the keys, said, "It's all yours," and walked out. When Paca inevitably ran the store ragged, Terry later sold the remaining stock for around $3,000, just enough to pay Robert the rest of the Golden Gate Publishing royalties. Robert suggested he learn the bass and join the band. There was an abandoned cello at Dodge's place, so Terry learned to play it like a bass, as he'd heard Henry Bogan do for the East Texas Serenaders. Terry spent four months learning the thing, and soon enough made his live debut with the band at an opening for Kathy Goodell at the San Francisco Art Institute.

On March 8 and 9, 1974, the Suits played a two-night gig at the Magic Cellar. Aline attended, looked around, and realized that Robert was sleeping with at least three other women in the audience, all also dressed as "Crumb girls" in plaid skirts, white shirts, and knee-high socks. She was appalled—furious at him for his callousness and at herself for thinking she was "special." A couple of weeks later, Aline flew to Tucson to get away. She reconnected with some of her friends and went out into the desert to take LSD and contemplate life and her place in the universe. What had she gotten into? She was only twenty-five, she had a life ahead of her, she could be a cartoonist with or without Robert. She had choices. A friend of hers needed a hand at an antique shop he planned to open in Boulder, Colorado, so Aline decided to try that out, figuring she could draw on the side.

Two weeks later, realizing that she really had split, Robert followed Aline to Tucson. They stayed together awhile up in Ken Weaver's old place in the water tower but couldn't come to terms. Then, once again, they went their separate ways—Robert to Chicago and New York, and Aline to Boulder. Within a few weeks, Robert both missed Aline and understood the larger picture of her place in his life. He flew to Boulder, went straight to the antique shop, and apologized to Aline. And while he wouldn't promise exclusivity, he committed to her as a partner and promised to end things with Kathy Goodell. He realized that he truly needed Aline in a way that he'd not needed anyone since those early naive days with Dana. She was, aside from a lover and friend, the only stabilizing force in his life. Together they took a job making cartoon cutout figures (as he had for Terry) for the antique store owner in exchange for a 1937 Chevrolet, which she drove back to California. Just as they were crossing the Bay Bridge, the front end started wobbling; they barely made it all the way back to Potter Valley.

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CHAPTER 16

On the Move Again

Robert and Aline arrived back in Potter Valley in May 1974 to find Aline's old trailer riddled with shotgun blasts. Dana had been using it for target practice. When Robert followed Aline to Tucson, Dana felt betrayed by someone she'd trusted and disoriented by the shift in the swampy emotional terrain over which she thought she had control. Paul Seidman was still hanging on, but his place as Dana's main man had been supplanted by Ken Weaver, who was now becoming an uncontrollable drunk. His outlaw charm was curdling into paranoia, viciousness, and violence. The place was getting psychologically and physically more and more dodgy.

Soon after their return to Potter Valley, Dana told Robert that her parents were coming to visit soon. She wanted Aline out of there before their arrival. Robert told her that Aline was with him—he wouldn't force her exit. Furious, Dana said, "Then you leave, too!" To which Robert replied, "OK, we'll both leave." Perhaps if he left, Robert wrote to Marty Pahls, Dana would find some peace, and maybe even Weaver would cool down. Jesse was by then an angry six-year-old confused by the chaos all around him. Robert loved him, and feared leaving him, but, remembering the countless fights he'd witnessed between Chuck and Bea, justified his exit by telling himself that staying would be worse for Jesse. And though he resolved to remain close, he let that, too, slip away. Robert and Aline found a small house a few minutes away for $22,000. Robert claims that when he approached Albert Morse to discuss the funds, Morse wouldn't release them, telling him instead that he needed to focus on paying his taxes—just that year the IRS had requested $25,000 in back payments. Robert felt infantilized by Morse, helpless even when trying to access his own accounts, and ever more alienated from his own work and life.

With little money between them, Robert and Aline couldn't even rent a place in nearby Ukiah, so Armstrong and Dodge offered space in the farmhouse they shared next to an abandoned orange orchard in Dixon, a small town in California's Central Valley three hours southeast of Potter Valley by car or nine hours by bus. The Central Valley was a still, slow place: flat for miles around the Sacramento River, endless plains of agriculture, yellow flats and brown dirt orchards of nuts. The counterculture had gone directly north of San Francisco into lush coastal greenery. Dixon is just ninety minutes northeast from the Haight but felt like another world and time. As broke as Aline and Robert were, Bob and Al were broker still. They lived on the endless supply of oranges and the cheapest possible snack: popcorn.

Spain Rodriguez, always there for his friends in a pinch, drove up to Potter Valley to help Robert and Aline pack and move. For two rainy days in June 1974, days that turned the ground to thick mud, the three of them packed up artwork, toys, and sixteen 7-Up crates full of 78s into a pickup truck. Then they drove it and the '37 Chevrolet west to Dixon. At the time, Robert wrote, "[Leaving Potter Valley was] the most painful thing I've ever done of my own free will… it was horrible… I miss Jesse and… I had to go… even though I loved that place and Jesse and my little house and all… I plan to visit after all the emotion dies down… I want to keep strong ties with Jesse, and Dana, too, if she can get past her bitterness." That was a bit naive, if understandably hopeful.

From Dixon, Robert tried to maintain his family ties. He would go down to San Francisco every so often to see Kathy (whom he was still stringing along), Maxon, and Sandra. But everyone was growing apart in different ways. One afternoon in August 1974 he and Kathy, along with Maxon and Veronica, watched Sandra play softball in the San Francisco Gay Softball League. Her team lost, so as a consolation Kathy bought some beer and hosted the Crumb brood back at her place. Sandra quickly got drunk and began demanding that Robert give her $400 a month "reparations," since he was a male "rich capitalist pig" and she was on welfare: "Sandra was railing at me about my millions and I was kind of trying to brush her off and not get into a big argument with her. I got real sore at her once before when she was heckling me about money… It's hard, you know, to deal with somebody calling you a pig in one breath and then wanting you to give them money in the next breath, sister or not." Just like any older brother, Robert exacerbated the situation by poking back at her, asking why she didn't try to get a job, why she didn't make an effort to support herself and Avery, all the while plunking on his banjo as if syncopating their argument.

In a rage, Sandra grabbed the banjo and smashed it, breaking the neck off the body. Robert snapped: "I went crazy and started cursing and pounding her… She went into a defensive position on the couch… Kept pounding her on the head and yelling at her in rage and vexation till Maxon pulled me off of her… Avery was freaked out… She grabbed him and ran out of the house." The Crumb family violence, while mostly tamped down, had briefly come roaring back. They didn't speak again until 1982 after that blowup. Robert narrated the story in a letter to Sandra's ex-husband, Marty Pahls—he was still in Chicago, despite Robert's offers to help set him up and find him work in San Francisco. Pahls missed his son but was a man who let his decisions gestate awhile. Marty just couldn't get his act together to pack up his walls of records and books, and perhaps he dreaded the idea of facing the Crumbs once again. Maxon Crumb wasn't faring much better. He was disheveled, felt himself coming apart. A psychiatrist recommended him for ATD (aid for the totally disabled) at $160 a month, and he began a psychological and physical withdrawal from his family and friends. He began to experience pain while having sex and declared himself celibate. Veronica began to perceive her “mild lover walk inside of himself and never come back.” Eventually, in 1974, he and Veronica split.

After Dixon, Robert and Aline briefly moved thirty minutes northwest to Winters, an agriculture town surrounded by orchards and farms. Aline had her trailer towed from Potter Valley to a funky little trailer court in town. Robert stayed in a bachelors-only two-room migrant workers’ shack in a row of four along Putah Creek with a shared bathroom and shower house. Robert’s sole concession to comfort was to buy a galvanized metal tub at the hardware store so he and Aline could have long soaks that scorching summer. But when someone attempted to break into Aline’s trailer, she no longer felt safe there and stayed with Robert in his shack. At the very least, they’d save some money. But this meant a new level of commitment, and new rules. Aline gave Robert an ultimatum. She wasn’t asking him to end his dalliances, but he needed to choose his primary relationship, her or Kathy. He chose Aline. Robert finally broke up with Kathy by letter in August 1974. He wrote: “Me and Aline are going to live together. There, I said it… I can’t go on the way I have… it’s too hard on me… and you… and Aline… I know that this decision means I’m giving up a lot… the certain magic that we had together… but the hassles involved in the way I’ve been living have become too much for me… maybe now you can start to direct your energy in some direction that won’t be a dead-end for you… Aline and me have spent long periods together in Potter Valley and all, and we’ve never had anything like the blowouts, tirades, tantrums, fights, etc. that you and I have had… and while there was/is great things between us, I know I could never live with you, because, as much as I love and lust after you, I can’t stand those emotional upheavals… I dread them and despair of them… it’s too much like my parents… you don’t know how much I dread that kind of conflict, because your parents didn't do it that way… it doesn't effect [*sic*] you the same way it does me…

"I'm not gonna pick on you for being the way you are… you are a kind and easy-going, generous person and have certain qualities that Aline definitely lacks… a certain vision of things that I enjoy partaking of when I'm with you, not to mention that obvious sexual magic… but, you've got to stop looking at me as a possible mate… it just wouldn't work… it has something to do with practical every-day shit that comprises survival in this world… in some way, our temperaments just clash too much on this level… we're both just too 'artistic' or something, to come to any kind of workable agreement on this level… we're both just too ego-centric… Aline is not like us in this way… she gives where I push, and I give where she pushes, and it makes it easier for us to get along day by day… what more can I say… it's gotten so bad I can't even bring myself to tell you all this on the phone… I can't stand to hear you cry, or to hear your hurt voice on the phone… I can't stand the thought of trying to explain it all to you over the phone… let alone in the flesh where I would have to gaze upon your sweet beautiful face which I just want to kiss when I look at it…"

Shortly after sending that letter, Robert was getting a haircut at the barbershop in Winters. Mr. Castro, the barber, was also the owner of that little row of migrant shacks. While clipping Robert's hair he sternly told him that he knew Robert had a woman in his place. He needed to get rid of her or move out. Moving yet again, Aline and Robert rented a little house in Dixon with hot water and a working bathroom down a secluded lane surrounded by trees and shrubbery, and open on three sides to fields. The old Chevy had given out completely, so Robert and Aline didn't have a car or a phone in Dixon. They talked and talked about all they'd been through in their lives—conversations that were enormously therapeutic for both of them. Together they found an even keel after the craziness of the sixties, San Francisco, and Potter Valley. They would walk fifteen minutes to Main Street for groceries, and Aline cooked. She enjoyed setting up house: “Right now it’s idyllic here in Dixon, dinky little town that it is,” she wrote to Betsy that fall. “The birdies are reassuringly chirping intensely, and the almond, apricot, grapes and figs in my yard are looking beautiful. It appears to be so peaceful. But I’m scared to go out because of the increased ultraviolet rays! Robert and I are still in love, I’m glad to say. We haven’t gotten bored or nothing. I think he thought I’d be bored by him if he didn’t run away now & then, but I like him more now.”

That fall, Robert and Aline published their collaborative comic *Dirty Laundry Comics*, inadvertently titled by Terry Zwigoff’s response to the project, “Why do you want to show everyone your dirty laundry?” That comic book debuted a creative partnership that ultimately produced over three hundred pages of comics in the ensuing decades. They became a kind of comedic duo, like George Burns and Gracie Allen. Even in life, they could break into routines, calling each other “oh baybeeee” and rattling off a quick repartee. Some of the strips were truer to life than others, and given the nature of the medium and their own sensibilities, everything is amplified, played for laughs, no matter what. This was a way for Robert to make comics without his critical consciousness sitting on his shoulder worried about what might or might not be worthy of his talent. The material generated itself as naturally as their conversations. “Dialogue just poured out of Aline,” Robert said. “She was a natural-born Jewish comedian. She often made me fall on the floor laughing.”

KOMINSKY & CRUMB

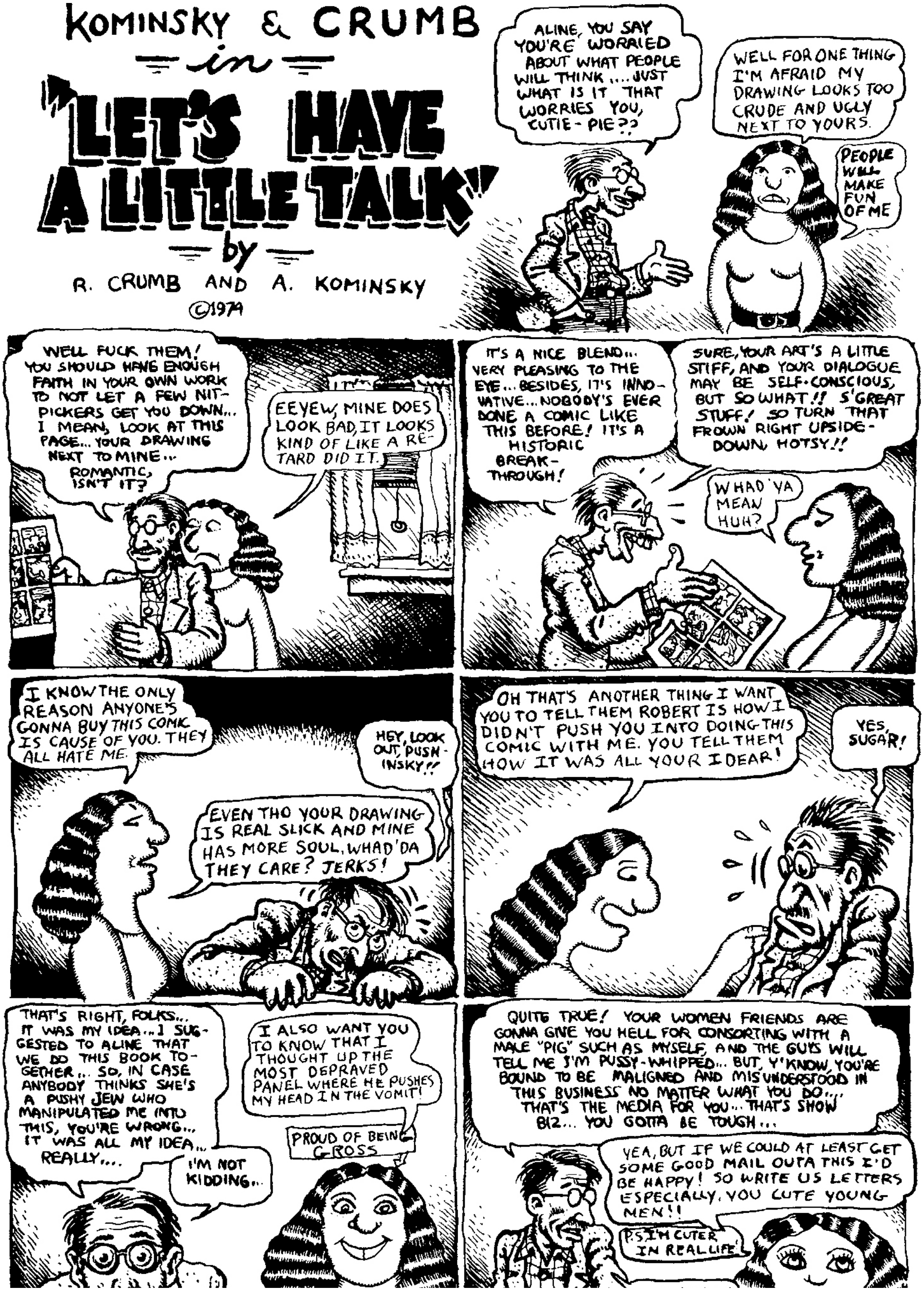
in

"LET'S HAVE A LITTLE TALK"

by

R. CRUMB AND A. KOMINSKY

©1974


ALINE, YOU SAY YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE WILL THINK .... JUST WHAT IS IT THAT WORRIES YOU, CUTIE-PIE??
WELL FOR ONE THING I'M AFRAID MY DRAWING LOOKS TOO CRUDE AND UGLY NEXT TO YOURS.
PEOPLE WILL MAKE FUN OF ME
WELL FUCK THEM! YOU SHOULD HAVE ENOUGH FAITH IN YOUR OWN WORK TO NOT LET A FEW NIT-PICKERS GET YOU DOWN... I MEAN, LOOK AT THIS PAGE... YOUR DRAWING NEXT TO MINE... ROMANTIC, ISN'T IT?
EEYEW, MINE DOES LOOK BAD, IT LOOKS KIND OF LIKE A RETARD DID IT.
IT'S A NICE BLEND... VERY PLEASING TO THE EYE... BESIDES, IT'S INNOVATIVE... NOBODY'S EVER DONE A COMIC LIKE THIS BEFORE! IT'S A HISTORIC BREAK-THROUGH!
SURE, YOUR ART'S A LITTLE STIFF, AND YOUR DIALOGUE MAY BE SELF-CONSCIOUS, BUT SO WHAT!! S'GREAT STUFF! SO TURN THAT FROWN RIGHT UPSIDE-DOWN, HOTSY!!
WHAD'YA MEAN HUH?
I KNOW THE ONLY REASON ANYONE'S GONNA BUY THIS COMIC IS CAUSE OF YOU. THEY ALL HATE ME.
HEY, LOOK OUT, PUSH-INSKY!!
EVEN THO YOUR DRAWING IS REAL SLICK AND MINE HAS MORE SOUL, WHAD'DA THEY CARE? JERKS!
OH THAT'S ANOTHER THING I WANT YOU TO TELL THEM ROBERT IS HOW I DIDN'T PUSH YOU INTO DOING THIS COMIC WITH ME. YOU TELL THEM HOW IT WAS ALL YOUR IDEAR!
YES, SUGAR!
THAT'S RIGHT, FOLKS... IT WAS MY IDEA... I SUGGESTED TO ALINE THAT WE DO THIS BOOK TOGETHER... SO, IN CASE ANYBODY THINKS SHE'S A PUSHY JEW WHO MANIPULATED ME INTO THIS, YOU'RE WRONG... IT WAS ALL MY IDEA... REALLY....
I'M NOT KIDDING...
I ALSO WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I THOUGHT UP THE MOST DEPRAVED PANEL WHERE HE PUSHES MY HEAD IN THE VOMIT!
PROUD OF BEING GROSS
QUITE TRUE! YOUR WOMEN FRIENDS ARE GONNA GIVE YOU HELL FOR CONSORTING WITH A MALE "PIG" SUCH AS MYSELF, AND THE GUYS WILL TELL ME I'M PUSSY-WHIPPED... BUT, Y'KNOW, YOU'RE BOUND TO BE MALIGNED AND MISUNDERSTOOD IN THIS BUSINESS NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO.... THAT'S THE MEDIA FOR YOU... THAT'S SHOW BIZ... YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH...
YEA, BUT IF WE COULD AT LEAST GET SOME GOOD MAIL OUTA THIS I'D BE HAPPY! SO WRITE US LETTERS ESPECIALLY, YOU CUTE YOUNG MEN!!
P.S. I'M CUTER IN REAL LIFE

NO YOU'RE NOT!
YES I AM!
HA HA NO MORE ROOM.

Outside of their union, though, *Dirty Laundry Comics* wasn't too popular. Friends and comic book fans were mostly disappointed and somewhat embarrassed for them. Thinking this mode could be a fun ongoing anthology, Robert and Aline tried to enlist other couples to contribute—but to no avail. They were on their own. Robert wrote to Marty Pahls: "I'm the one who really wanted to do [the comic], more than Aline… she was worried right from the start that people would accuse her of 'going along for the ride,' that her drawing would look bad next to mine… that the Crumb purists wouldn't like it… but I advised her not to pay any attention to all that… because I needed to do a two-man comic… I need to have someone to work against in the way that Charles and I used to… only this time, I felt like I was Charles, being older and a more experienced cartoonist… But I think Aline held up her end real well and was able to come back with strong ideas as much as I was… my technique is more impressive to most people, though… that's to be expected… We've gotten a lot of letters putting down the comic… mostly they put it down because of Aline's crude drawing… but you can never please the purists, and it always takes the fans a couple of years to except [*sic*] anything that breaks the patterns they're used to looking for in the work of their favorite greats… like me. It was all predictable… Personally I like the comic a lot, and think our humor worked real well together, and the experience was good for both our work in different ways… I think Aline'll be right up there with the best of 'em if she keeps working at it."

What money Robert and Aline had came from what she saved from her summer job working on a tomato harvester for a local farm and a small trickle of income from Robert's royalties. As he wrote to Jay Lynch, "All I can say is, thank god I came up with that 'Keep-on-Truckin" gimmick… I've been living off the settlements from the dozens of rip-offs of ‘Keep-on-Truckin” junk that Albert Morse keeps relentlessly digging up for the past two years now. I dunno what I’ll do when that runs out. Albert has been urging me lately to ‘get back to work’ on some commercial-type projects… he says the ‘Keep-on-Truckin” bonanza is startin’ to dry up.” Robert couldn’t get back to work. At thirty-one, he was, for the first time since he was eight years old, flat out of ideas. He hadn’t drawn a comic book by himself, or even a story, in over a year. Morse, however, was right. And unfortunately it wasn’t just the “Truckin’ bonanza” that was winding down.

* * *

The years 1970–72 had been an enormous boom time for underground comics—over a dozen publishers released over a thousand titles. It seemed like they would print anything, and did—a lot of it barely readable—until, by the end of 1972, it became a glut. In March 1973, the Print Mint published *Zap* 6 with a print run of one hundred thousand copies.

There was simply too much product, and the public soon felt burned by the schlock crowding the shelves. Rather than sift through the stacks, consumers simply turned away from all of it. And the culture was shifting. Head shops were closing. Fads like “Keep On Truckin’” were on the way out. Elements of the counterculture had become normalized, from jeans, weed, long hair, divorce, and the pill to Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead, and *Easy Rider*. But the anarchic, community-based ideas that birthed the counterculture fizzled out. Music and entertainment magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* absorbed some of the underground writers and consolidated the culture around rock. But otherwise, the heads drifted in different directions, from new age spirituality to identity-based groups to off-the-grid survivalism to violent revolution in the form of the

Weathermen and related organizations. The protests, college campus occupations, and happenings led to tremendous legal and legislative reforms, but they also prompted a backlash. For many Americans the desire for order outweighed the desire for change. Nixon was twice elected, and there was a strong reaction against the gains for equal rights and the cultural avant-garde. What had been a collective moment of all-out transformation fractured into a kind of cultural libertarianism: it was every person for themselves.

As the audience drifted away, other financial and legal pressures mounted on the underground comics business. Until the middle of 1973, First Amendment protection only excluded material without any redeeming social or artistic value. *Snatch*, among many other Robert Crumb cultural products, could be defended on the basis of its cultural worth. So, while the police could confiscate, fine, and imprison, proving something legally obscene was very difficult, though as in the case of *Zap* 4, possible. But in June 1973, the Supreme Court handed down its decision on *Miller v. California*, 413 US 15, and swiftly changed what could safely be sold in stores. The case began when publisher Marvin Miller challenged his 1971 misdemeanor conviction for sending “obscene” materials through the mail: advertisements for publications such as *I, a Homosexual* and *An Illustrated History of Pornography*. Perhaps reacting to the “free love” era, Chief Justice Warren E. Burger decided he’d had enough. In a five-to-four decision led by Nixon appointees, the court declared that the new test would be “whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.” This meant that in any town, anywhere, a publication could be declared obscene and the authorities could confiscate it without concern that a higher court might clear the verdict. For conservative cops and prosecutors it was one easy case after another. Publishers and retailers didn't know what the future would bring, but it was clearly not a time to take risks on comic books.

Worse yet, a global recession hit in the fall of 1973, caused in part by an embargo led by the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries against any Israel supporters during the Yom Kippur War. All commodities that required fuel became scarce and expensive. The cost of paper and transportation rose, escalating the expense of publishing and shipping underground comic books. And while publishers raised their prices accordingly, customers now had less money to spend.

With fewer customers, higher costs, and the threat of legal action, stores simply stopped carrying underground comic books; many returned them in bulk, resulting in publishers, suddenly buried in unsold inventory, being unable to release new books. In 1973, Ron Turner's Last Gasp publishing company had an 80 percent drop in sales. At the end of that year, the Texans at Rip Off Press burned excess stock to keep warm in their drafty warehouse space at the base of Potrero Hill. Kitchen Sink's Denis Kitchen wrote to Robert: "The older titles are quickly turning into dogs. Every publisher is getting stuck with old books that sell very slowly or not at all. That represents an investment that is either trickling back or lost. It used to be that we could count on books to continue selling well for at least a year, in some cases much longer (*Zap*, for example). But now most books sell well for a few months and then fissle [*sic*]. It looks like that will be the trend, at least as long as there are so many older books still available and fighting for the limited display space in most stores."

The Print Mint was coasting on those older titles—focusing primarily on reprinting the popular comic books and taking on little else. By the end of 1973, there were one million copies of the first seven issues of *Zap* in print. This was both a sign of its success and an example of the glut. The hopeful cartoonists who once swarmed to the city in droves began to drift away. Some went back home and fell out of the medium entirely, many became graphic designers or illustrators, and still others moved to more mainstream (and better-paying) outlets like the humor magazine *National Lampoon*.

An underground comics newsletter declared: "My advice to you new artists is hang on to your stuff. Coming to the Bay Area and making the rounds this fall would just bum you out, because nobody is taking on any new books and there's no front money to be found." The underground went dormant.

Robert, the beacon of the movement, was slightly removed from the fray, though the desperation of his cohort came through in frantic correspondence from San Francisco, Chicago, and Wisconsin. He was playing music, drawing in his sketchbook, and lying low in Dixon. Unlike their immediate family and friends, Robert and Aline, together and apart, had solid survival instincts. They knew they had to get to the other side of the madness around them. In the fall of 1974, they went east for the holidays. They had Thanksgiving with the Kurtzman family. As close to a loving father figure as Robert ever had, Harvey Kurtzman was still working on *Little Annie Fanny* for *Playboy* and had begun teaching at the School of Visual Arts—whenever Robert was in New York he would give a talk to the class. They visited Aline's mother and stepfather in Long Island, and then her grandparents in Miami. Aline wrote to Betsy Klein about the trip: "Meeting Robert's family was pretty weird. His mother was real sweet but on speed and pretty crazy. 'The old man' was a lot nicer than I expected. Kind of rigid but nice, very polite and reserved.

Robert looks like him. And Charles was physically a wreck, from taking lots of Thorazine and having his teeth out but he didn't seem that nutso to me. I felt really sorry for him though and Robert & me tried to talk him into coming out here but I doubt that he will because the outside world really terrifies him."

Back in Dixon they went on a health kick that would last decades: no more endless bottles of soda and plates of spaghetti and meatballs. In came water and more vegetables. Robert stopped taking LSD and quit marijuana by the end of 1974, about which he wrote to Marty: "I think I was in a dope-stupor a lot of the time in the last seven years or so… Now I have this funny feeling that I'm gradually reclaiming my mind or something… my ability to grasp complex problems and situations is returning… I think marijuana breaks down memory, so that, while the immediate experience is enjoyable or enlightening, there's no way that it can be applied in any practical way… There's a great wisdom to be learned from that in itself… What good is wisdom if you can't apply it in some way that's going to make your life better…? I know that the Dope Period freed me from a lot of useless fears and hang-ups… it kind of pulled me out of some old world and into a new one."

Along with clean living, Robert wanted to somehow maintain contact with Jesse. In February of 1975, Robert visited Potter Valley to pick up his son and bring him back to Dixon for a stay. Ken Weaver, who at that point was on the outs with Dana, was spending his days in his trailer watching television and drinking beer. That particular afternoon he polished off a bottle of Courvoisier. When Robert showed up, Weaver was so drunk and insulting that the two nearly came to blows. The next morning, Weaver started in again. Things were so tense that Dana called the county sheriff. When he appeared and asked Weaver's name, the response was, "I am lord God Satan!" That was that. After a tussle, Weaver was taken to the local lockup and dried out awhile. His time in Potter Valley was ending. Within a year he returned to his native Texas and worked in the oil fields, found Jesus for a while, and eventually got right with himself. After the violent scene, Robert took Jesse on the nine-hour, multi-bus journey to Dixon. Jesse stayed for five days before returning to Dana in Potter Valley. That was the last time father and son saw each other for nearly seven years. According to Robert and Aline, Dana made any other visits nearly impossible. She would agree to bring Jesse to a meeting place between their homes but then cancel at the last minute or simply not show up. She told Jesse that Robert, and Aline in particular, didn't want him around. Robert wrote letters to Jesse that Dana intercepted and kept sealed in a shoebox. Always leery of confrontation no matter the stakes, Robert didn't press the issue. He wondered if Jesse was doomed from the start and worried that he still wasn't father material. There was a part of him that, as when he'd left Philadelphia, just wanted to erase the conflict. Jesse, though, felt abandoned; he attended the local schools and grew up as a country boy—adventurous, rebellious, and pissed off.

———

That year, at the arid midpoint of the decade, in a new environment, on the other side of the countercultural wave he'd helped create, Robert reengaged with his own sense of purpose by writing in his sketchbook:

> —Searching for something halfway between the All-American Romantic attitude of Norman Rockwell and the nihilistic bitterness of S. Clay Wilson.
>
> —LSD & dope induced visions of the sixties have all but dissolved away in the boiling pot of time!
>
> —My mind is a blank when I need an idea! Zero… Nothing… Nowhere. No formula. No laff-finder. No characters. No continuity. My life is a tangled overly complex web of involvements and vague responsibilities. The idea, the vision is not there. The attitude is not there… The ability is there… The technique, the knowledge is there. I

yearn to apply it, but the soul wallows in confusion and the complexities of day-to-day life.

Only the sex-vision is clear, but it is not to be confused with artistic vision… Is it a mistake to let the sex fantasy get too involved in the work? The sex fantasy has overpowered and affected everything else… But I really don't feel if it has that valid a place in the work… Everyone's sex-drive is different and Joe Blow isn't that interested in the next fellow's particular preferences… He loves only his own fantasies… Everyone else's are only a dull & stupid curiosity to him.

—The audience… Who are the guys I'm trying to make laugh or whatever? Is the problem that the audience is no longer a clear-cut image to me? Or is it that they just want more of the same and I'm sick of the old approach and haven't yet evolved a new approach…? The audience never knows what it wants until it gets it… The people might expect a certain thing or they may be tired of it, but a new thing can catch their fancy… Then again, maybe it won't. Impossible to predict the audience's taste… Only the trend-follower, cynically cashing in on the crest of a wave, can really exploit the public…

—Do you desire to be a spokesman? Do you want to lead? Do you want your work to articulate the feelings of some segment of the populace? Do you wish to enlighten them? Give them some uplifting inspiration?

—Besides, such art only happens when the artist, struggling with his own subconscious yearnings and slaving away, happens to stumble on an idea who's [*sic*] time has come. This was my experience in 1967… Then when they love you for it, make a hero out of you and interview you to death, you (me) over-react and start drawing socially irresponsible and hostile work which you (I) then feel guilty about… The relationship between cartoonist and his public is a complex one.

—Then again, the successful formula: the trap of all artists and writers involved in media: once you hit on something that makes it, stick with it… Almost all cartoonists of the old days fell into this (Dagwood, *Grin and Bear It, Peanuts, Little Annie Fanny*). To be avoided like the plague in my opinion. Deadening to the soul of the artist.

—Media itself is dangerous to the "soul of the artist"… Too powerful, too overwhelming, too rough on the delicate balances of the personality. The bigger you make it, the greater the danger of being shattered by it. The traps and pitfalls are many: The personal life becomes many times more complicated. With success comes glory and its corruptions… The sudden availability of personal fantasy fulfillment. Sexual, material, etc… Leading to a loss of self-discipline and simplicity in the life, which one needs to keep at the work. The work shifts in other ways, even if one manages to stay on it, as I did for years. The expectations of the *public*… You see your own work reflected in the eye of John Q. Public… the work becomes what you think he wants to see… It loses its spontaneity… It becomes a stereotyped image of its earlier self. Sooner or later the artist gets sick of drawing this stereotyped stuff, but he can't stop… They won't let him… Sooner or later he either grinds to a halt, as I did, or his work gets thinner and thinner… Success takes its toll. The media-success and its glory takes the artist away from his simple and humble origins, in which all of his

> best ideas were germinated… Now he can only attempt to imitate his earlier life, or draw inspiration from the corrupted world of power games he now lives in (as I did)……
>
> —To withdraw from the life of the "star" and still desire to do the kind of work that makes one into a star is extremely agonizing to say the least. Maybe impossible. To desire to be great in some form of mass media (cartooning in my case), and yet try to avoid the glory that they want to heap on you, not to mention the parasitic qualities which humans manifest toward the "star"… Those who would bathe in your glory, those who would exploit you for profit, to cope with all of this and still try to sit down with a clear vision of an idea to draw… It's tough. Well, I'm glad I got that off my chest… But I still don't have an idea!

In moments of crisis, which this most definitely was, Robert burrows deep into his consciousness looking for answers. His family was in shambles and his creative life was a tangle of conflicting impulses. But clearing his mind, getting away from the spotlight, and achieving stability with Aline gave him at least a chance of finding his hold again.

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CHAPTER 17

Renewal

During his 1975–76 time of resetting himself, a few projects were brewing that would nudge Robert out of his rut. He needed outlets like his and Aline's comic book, *Dirty Laundry Comics*, that took the pressure off his persona, moved him away from the "Keep On Truckin'" guy. Robert knew that if underground comics were to continue, the form had to evolve from hippie ephemera to more personal and idiosyncratic material. Some cartoonists agreed, especially Bill Griffith and Art Spiegelman, who had become fast friends in San Francisco. Both were ambitious for the medium and for their own work, which was of a different order than their peers. They didn't want to just entertain—they wanted to stretch the form. In 1973, Griffith wrote an editorial for the *San Francisco Phoenix*, "A Sour Look at the Comics Scene or 'Out of the Inkwell and into the Toilet.'" He argued against what he saw as the overwhelming influence of the EC comics revivalists using the underground to publish fannish re-creations of 1950s fantasy, horror, and science fiction comics without any critical remove or personal insight. Spiegelman felt much the same, and in 1975 they put their labor where their mouths were by coediting *Arcade*, a magazine-sized comics anthology focused on the best in the medium, as well as archival materials and illustrated prose. The name nodded to both Robert's handmade publication's title (by now the legend of the Crumb brothers was passed from artist to artist) and the colorful glory of Coney Island. As Griffith explained, "[It was] a conscious effort to move away from the stifling and limiting themes of the early underground—sex, dope, violence, etc. The need for that kind of catharsis had passed. Just as we'd all pretty much stopped taking acid as a way of 'finding ourselves.' We *had* found ourselves and we wanted to get on with the business of being artists. Nothing's wrong with a belly-laugh—we just wanted to tickle the cerebellum as well as the funny bone." Robert agreed to draw the first five covers, knowing, as they did, that his presence would give it extra visibility and sales. Print Mint, now owned by Bob Rita and his wife, Peggy, published the magazine, funding it by taking out a $31,000 mortgage on their home.

In its seven-issue run, *Arcade* published some of the underground's best and most lasting stories. Each issue featured illustrated prose by writers whose influence permeated comics: S. Clay Wilson drew for William S. Burroughs, and Robert for Charles Bukowski (they met in Los Angeles soon after; Bukowski's advice: "I like your comics, kid, you're very good, just stay away from cocktail parties"). Spiegelman drew comics that examined the formal underpinnings of the medium, experimenting with how time and space function on the page and the nature of cartooning genres and tropes. Griffith stretched out and drew complex fiction and nonfiction, including a biography of Henri Rousseau; the finest cartoonists of their generation made exceptional work for the magazine: Jay Lynch, Rory Hayes, Willy Murphy, Kim Deitch, Spain Rodriguez, Justin Green. They even coerced local filmmakers George Kuchar, Sally Cruikshank, and Curt McDowell into making compelling and idiosyncratic comics.

Robert began slowly to feel his way back into the medium, most notably with "Let's Talk Sense About This Here America," a comic essay that has the lyricism of his "Motor City Blues." In off-kilter, overcrowded panels he imagines the country as a series of monsters: "America the Cruel Bully" (a tank bullying a Vietnamese man), "America the Glutton" (a woman pushing an overstuffed shopping cart while eating), “America the Greedy” (a sign for condominiums posted in a virgin landscape), and “America the Ugly” (an infinitude of chaotic signs, cars, and endless wires). It was a splenetic and messy signal that he was coming back to artistic life. *Arcade* ran quarterly from the spring of 1975 to the fall of 1976. It never found an audience—newsstands wouldn’t take it and it was too frequent for head shops. It was also about a half decade ahead of its time. The idea of comics as a place for advanced thematic and formal ideas just didn’t have any traction yet.

Helping with the production on some issues of *Arcade*, as well as contributing excellent comics of their own, were Aline and a new friend, Diane Noomin, who had moved to San Francisco in 1972. A Brooklyn artist who needed a fresh start, Diane met Aline at a party; the two quickly realized that they shared a self-deprecating sense of humor about their lives as New York Jewish women in the postwar era. They were also both involved with big presences on the comics scene: Noomin with Bill Griffith, and Aline with Robert, and they were feeling alienated by the pressure to produce material that starred idealized female characters in the cause of feminist uplift. In 1976, seeking their own space, Aline and Diane published their two-person comic book, *Twisted Sisters*, with a now-infamous cover self-portrait of Aline sitting on the toilet worrying about herself. It was a landmark in the medium—funny, brutally frank, and well-told comics about their lives as women in a patriarchal postwar world. Diane invented her louche, cocktail-swilling alter ego Didi Glitz, and Aline used *her* alter ego, the Bunch. Aline used to grimace when men would comment on her resemblance to Robert’s character Honey Bunch Kaminski (itself a depraved riff on the *Honey Bunch* series of 1920s children’s books), so eventually she appropriated and reimagined herself as “the Bunch,” picking her face, sniffing her fingers, examining her excrement.

At the time, Aline wrote to Betsy Klein, "I'm having problems rationalizing printing my crude personal scratchings. Sometimes I feel ridiculous to think that lots of men and machinery are working to produce a monument to my ego. In a way it's very contrary to my spiritual quest." When Betsy wrote back, concerned that her friend was too far down the rabbit hole of morbid self-examination, Aline responded, "I am & have always been grounded by the skepticism of Mr. Bunch. I could never suspend cynicism… and totally believe in anything. This of course has its vice and virtue… Let's say that I feel the line between comedy/tragedy is really thin and when one is on that line the work, to me, is most poignant. I guess it's ok with me if you laugh or cry, as long as you do something!!"

Aline's comics never sold terribly well, but they struck a nerve with other women looking for kindred spirits. Anne Beatts, a writer for the then-new show *Saturday Night Live*, published Aline, along with Diane Noomin, Trina Robbins, Fran Lebowitz, Phyllis Diller, and many others, in the 1976 anthology book *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women*, which attempted to counteract the male-dominated humor scenes in New York and Los Angeles. Many of the writers and actors involved with the early years of *Saturday Night Live*, particularly Beatts's partner Michael O'Donoghue, as well as Buck Henry, John Belushi, and Dan Aykroyd (whose "Coneheads" was directly inspired by Bill Griffith's character Zippy; Belushi himself wrote to Zippy—the character—asking him to host *SNL*), were underground comics fans. Sometime in 1976 a booker from the show called Al and Bob's place to invite the Cheap Suit Serenaders to be its musical guest. To the band's dismay, Robert turned it down flat. He wasn't remotely interested in returning to that level of exposure.

Saturday Night Live arrived at a perfect moment in the 1970s as a funny and relatively safe reminder of the gonzo sensibility of the 1960s. It owed as much to Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad* as Robert did, but funny as it could be, it was driven by ratings, not artistic necessity, and would never vault past the bounds of propriety. This was much to the consternation of writers like O'Donoghue, who had come over from *National Lampoon* magazine (for which Beatts also wrote), itself the wildly successful and outré, if very macho, outgrowth of the college humor magazine the *Harvard Lampoon*. Beatts followed Aline's career at least long enough to consider her for a writing job, flying her to New York to visit the writers' room in 1977. An offer didn't follow, but Aline, who grew up going to see comedy acts in Manhattan and the Catskills, relished the validation.

Continuing his creative and personal renewal, in the autumn of 1975, Robert, Aline, and Terry took off from California on a cross-country trip in a 1966 Ford van looking for 78 records, old soda pop bottles, and all manner of prewar packaging and advertising. They swung through Nevada, Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, where they did not have the luck of the legendary collectors of a decade earlier. Arriving in New York, they dropped in on Nick Perls's home in Greenwich Village and found all the records they wanted right there. In Philadelphia, Robert visited the family home. On the way, Terry remembers, he spotted a movie theater playing the old Bobby Driscoll *Treasure Island*, the significance of which he only realized years later. The scene was much the same as it had always been: Bea lived mostly on the living room couch with the television on all day and night. Charles was heavily sedated but still lucid. Chuck was steadily trudging along. He had been the training supervisor and training manager in three corporations—International Latex, ARA Services, and Ford Aerospace (formerly Philco). While working with Ford, he designed and directed "the implementation of plant-wide training programs in large manufacturing operations in both the Far East and South America," which essentially meant that workers would need to meet American-style safety and efficiency goals at lower wages. Chuck burnished his credentials by publishing two corporate training handbooks, *How to Communicate Effectively* (1965) and *Training People Effectively: The Teaching Manual for Instructors and Supervisors in Business, Education, Industry and the Professions* (1970), and wrote articles for trade journals with scarcely believable titles: *Plant Engineering, Trained Men, In-Plant Food Management, Vend Magazine, Insurance*, and *Hotel and Motel Management.* The bills for Bea's and Charles's medical care were so high and constant that he would never be able to retire. The situation on the ground was precarious, Chuck wrote to his siblings: "Bea is going along as ever. The whole world is against her and I am most of the world. She and Chuckie take care of one another and the two cats. Chuckie's outlook is very frustrating. He doesn't even pretend to want to work. Carol lives in this area but I see very little of her anymore and we used to be very close. Bea seems to think that her children, with the exception of Chuckie, are all against her. I feel very sorry for her but I am the last person she will listen to."

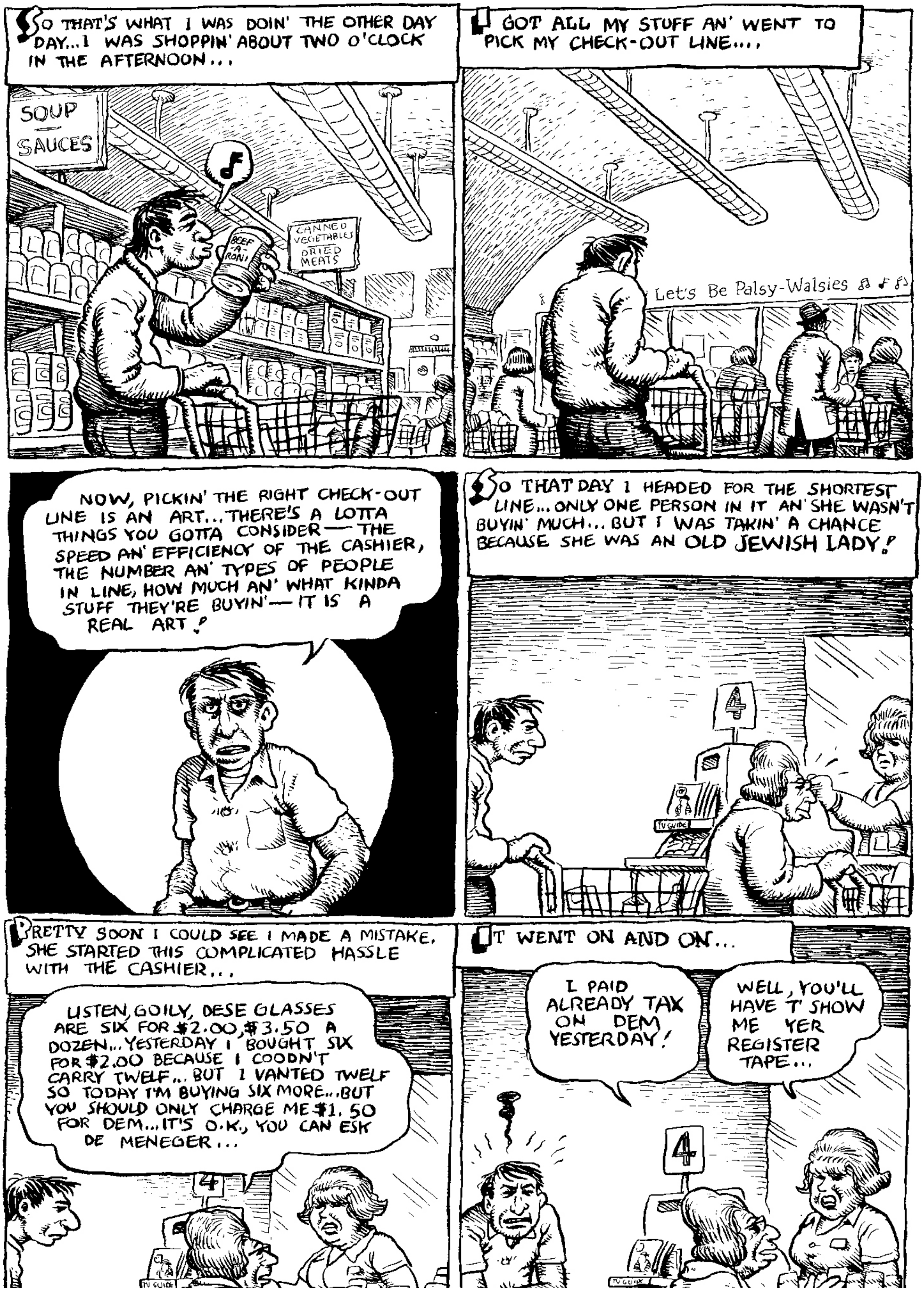
And Chuck was somewhat mystified by what the postwar era had wrought. Watergate broke his heart—the idea of corruption in his country—the greatest country—saddened and confused him. But he also wasn't searching out the causes. He did not look underneath the surface as Robert did because he felt he understood the terrain. He didn't. His sense of moral rectitude was no match for the corruption of the American Century.

That trip, Robert and Chuck had a long conversation for the first time since 1968 and reached an understanding of sorts. Robert reported to Marty: "My father's answer to the problem of what's wrong with America is that he thinks the giant corporations should be broken down into smaller companies—sort of the trust-busting approach... he thinks it's a matter of big business just getting too big. I was surprised that he was able to think that deeply into it. I was proud of 'im… I really was… I wanted to find out everything he was thinking about things, and he really did get into it… He even acknowledged that the radical youth movement has done some good and exposed corruption… My father's one of these super-honest type guys…" One thing Robert and his father could agree on was the failure of America to live up to its own political and ethical ideals.

On the way back to California, they stopped off at Robert's old Cleveland pal Harvey Pekar's apartment. In the early 1970s, Pekar, a file clerk at a Cleveland hospital, had developed an idea for writing comic book stories about his life that cartoonists would draw. Robert Armstrong had drawn the very first story in 1973, and Robert did a one-off for *The People's Comics*. Pekar had begun developing his own self-published comics magazine, *American Splendor*. Pekar took the permissiveness of the underground to tell realist stories of working-class life. He was just the sort of writer Robert loved—blue-collar, ruthlessly honest, alert to everyday details both beautiful and irritating. With Robert captive in his squalid apartment, Pekar hounded him to draw stories for *American Splendor*, plying him with his drug of choice: rare 78s. The magazine launched in 1976 with a story by Robert, commencing a decade-long collaboration.

Pekar, an avid reader of comic books himself, laid out all his stories using simple stick figures. He had a yarn spinner's instinct for the rhythms of panel-sequenced storytelling. With Pekar's point of view and haranguing dialogue to structure his stories, Robert was able to focus on body language and setting, rendering spaces that readers could inhabit with him. In the 1978 story "Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines," Pekar and Robert enliven the social world of the grocery store: oversized signage, thin aisles, customers chatting, and Pekar, hunched and seething with impatience, navigating the length of the checkout lines, fearful he'll get stuck behind an old lady dithering over coupons. When he returns home to his dilapidated apartment, he realizes he's forgotten some items. And so it's back to purgatory again.

Robert's work with Pekar brought him back to the well-observed body language he'd honed with *Fritz the Cat*, and, in Pekar's spare, direct treatment of his subject, a way to embrace making even-keeled comics about the prosaic stuff of real life. As with so much of Robert's collaborations, *American Splendor* was most commercially and critically successful when Robert was drawing it; Pekar found ready and able collaborators to work with, but none melded their visuals with his prose voice quite as well. With Pekar's baseline concerns helping him back into cartoon realism, Robert began to explore how he might reapproach comics with this sensibility. He thought about books he'd read and stories he'd heard with which he might take a similar tack, turning his skills to a new kind of storytelling.


SO THAT'S WHAT I WAS DOIN' THE OTHER DAY DAY... I WAS SHOPPIN' ABOUT TWO O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON...
SOUP — SAUCES
BEEF-A-RONI
CANNED VEGETABLES DRIED MEATS
I GOT ALL MY STUFF AN' WENT TO PICK MY CHECK-OUT LINE....
Let's Be Palsy-Walsies
NOW, PICKIN' THE RIGHT CHECK-OUT LINE IS AN ART... THERE'S A LOTTA THINGS YOU GOTTA CONSIDER — THE SPEED AN' EFFICIENCY OF THE CASHIER, THE NUMBER AN' TYPES OF PEOPLE IN LINE, HOW MUCH AN' WHAT KINDA STUFF THEY'RE BUYIN' — IT IS A REAL ART!
SO THAT DAY I HEADED FOR THE SHORTEST LINE... ONLY ONE PERSON IN IT AN' SHE WASN'T BUYIN' MUCH... BUT I WAS TAKIN' A CHANCE BECAUSE SHE WAS AN OLD JEWISH LADY!
4
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PRETTY SOON I COULD SEE I MADE A MISTAKE. SHE STARTED THIS COMPLICATED HASSLE WITH THE CASHIER...
LISTEN, GOILY, DESE GLASSES ARE SIX FOR $2.00, $3.50 A DOZEN... YESTERDAY I BOUGHT SIX FOR $2.00 BECAUSE I COODN'T CARRY TWELF... BUT I VANTED TWELF SO TODAY I'M BUYING SIX MORE... BUT YOU SHOULD ONLY CHARGE ME $1.50 FOR DEM... IT'S O.K., YOU CAN ESK DE MENEGER...
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IT WENT ON AND ON...
I PAID ALREADY TAX ON DEM YESTERDAY!
WELL, YOU'LL HAVE T' SHOW ME YER REGISTER TAPE...
4
TV GUIDE

“Standing Behind Old Jewish Ladies in Supermarket Lines,” *American Splendor* no. 3, 1978.

At the same time he began working with Pekar, Robert was grinding out a weekly *Mr. Natural* comic strip for the *Village Voice*, which was also still publishing Jules Feiffer. He needed the regular $200 fee; $400 a month went to Dana for spousal and child support, and with the remainder he and Aline could live decently. The comic strip was a shadow of its former self. The plotting was slow, though Mr. Natural’s wanderings through city and country gave Robert a chance to try out his renewed interest in crosshatching and realistic rendering. It ran from February through October 1976 and was later published as the comic book *Mr. Natural* 3. He agonized the whole time: “The question is: why am I doing a strip for this lousy publication that I basically hate? Well, for one thing, it seems like the work is so easy for the amount of money I’m getting… But then, I put off working on it all day today and didn’t get to it until way into the night… Why? Why don’t I have any enthusiasm for it? I tried to quit a little while back… I wasn’t going to do it anymore… I was gearing myself up for a much poorer way of life… Meditating on spending less on records, etc… Aline really got into it with a fanatic fervor… no more spending, thinking about getting a job in the tomato cannery, everything…” He tried to quit, but the *Voice*’s art director, Gil Eisner, cajoled him back. Robert wrote that he was actually relieved: “So, I have to do the strip… I could tell Aline was secretly relieved too. And it’s such easy work—six little panels for 200 dollars… Look around you! People struggle hard to earn a living… They have to hustle their asses! All I have to do is knock out six little panels a week for a nice comfortable living…”

But it still weighed on him. He didn’t want to be the “Mr. Natural” guy as surely as he didn’t want to be the “Keep On Truckin’” guy. A few weeks after his earlier misgivings, he wrote, "[I] don't want to do a regular strip for the *Voice* anymore… The hell with it… I hate the thought of having to do it for the money… The hell with the money, I don't want to be a responsible adult… Can't stand it… It kills me… It's torture… Got to keep my life open… I can only think of the bleak life my father got trapped in—that's my worst fear… Once, as a small child, I saw my father break down and cry because my mother called him a bum. I won't let it happen to me… Does this mean I'm a 'bum'?"

He wasn't a bum. He knew that he needed to keep his life together. But just as he felt the decision was made for him to stay on the strip, so he would have the decision made for him to leave it. The August 1976 issue of the collaged and hand-lettered *Punk*, a new magazine covering the Ramones, Blondie, and other up-and-comers in the downtown New York music scene, contained "Mr. Neutral by R. Crumbun" by Robert Romagnoli. The brief strip lambastes the *Village Voice* work and has Mr. Natural turning his monologue on his creator: "Can there be no redemption for this tired-out over-drawn cartoon has-been?" There was more than a little oedipal kick to this: *Punk* was cofounded by John Holmstrom, a onetime student of Harvey Kurtzman's at SVA. He had published an interview between Crumb and Kurtzman in *Punk* just two issues earlier. Killing Daddy is a necessary step for any young flamethrower, and anything that reeked of patchouli was fair game. But Robert wasn't a relic of arena rock or a puffed-up old hippie. He was, in fact, closer in attitude to the punks than to his old neighbors in the Haight, and recognized their energy and critique.

Robert's two-page response, written the same day as his "bum" diary entry, was published in *Punk* issue seven, reading in part: "I have to admit I was deeply hurt by this… cut to the quick… I'll never draw Mr. Natural again… I hope you're satisfied… I may never draw another comic… nobody likes me anymore… I'm washed up… It's just as well, I suppose, I hate the media… I hate the *Village Voice*, especially… your magazine is a thousand times more interesting than the *Voice*…" He goes on to heap disdain on youth culture but then praises *Punk* for being "loose and funny and obviously out there on some sleazy extremist fringe," before offering a bit of advice and an accurate prediction: "Who knows, maybe hand-printed 'punk' nihilism is the next big thing… slick, middle-aged businessmen with hip up-to-date leather outfits will start approaching you with big bucks… then what?" He wasn't being a wiseass. He has always felt close to and protective of anyone making a go of it underground, and he knew what was coming at them. Robert abruptly ended Mr. Natural by having his old disciple Flakey Foont and Foont's live-in partner, Ruth Schwartz, commit him to a mental hospital, where he remained for about a decade.

Robert's financial concerns only increased when he and Dana at last finalized their divorce on May 2, 1977. She received the Potter Valley property free and clear, $200 a month in child support, the copyrights to *The Yum Yum Book* (which had been published the previous year and promptly remaindered) and a cookbook she wrote and he illustrated called *Eat It*, as well as 5 percent of any further "Keep On Truckin'" revenue generated by Albert Morse. The following month he withdrew his power of attorney from Morse, certain, without proof, that Morse and Dana were somehow colluding against him. Dana, meanwhile, thrived as a local earth-mother figure, quick with a wisecrack and always ready to barter her services. She owned a catering business called Simply Delicious and made desserts for a local eatery. For years she hosted an annual "Mendocino Mothers Day" at the compound.

To make up from some of the lost Mr. Natural income, Robert did a quick job for the November 1977 *High Times*, the surprisingly successful marijuana-culture magazine founded in 1974 by underground press vet Thomas Forçade. It became one of the few places that many of the underground writers and artists could find work, albeit nestled alongside plenty of weed-porn photographs. Robert, wary of hedonism at this stage, saw it as a symbol of the jocular macho hippie culture he'd fled—the people who would shout "Keep on truckin', R!" to him on the street. He confessed to Marty Pahls that he might've been selling out, but at $300 a page for five pages of comics he couldn't refuse. He refused plenty of other offers that year, including $10,000 from the Rolling Stones for an album cover. Robert just hated the music—noisy, full of faux authenticity, and corporate—too much to even consider it.

For *High Times* he drew himself being interviewed by a hip, handsome dude berating him about giving up on the sixties, being burned out, another casualty of the love generation; when Robert loses it and lunges at his interlocutor, he's quickly dispatched with a karate chop. The strip ends with the mustachioed reporter sauntering out with an attractive woman. What Robert loved in *Punk* and resented in *High Times*—his consistent identification with the underdog—would serve him well in the ensuing years. He was open to alternatives, and found one in the magazine offshoot of *The Whole Earth Catalog, CoEvolution Quarterly*. Having lived in Mendocino, and now surrounded by agriculture in the Central Valley, Robert was increasingly interested in environmental policy and sustainable living. In 1977, he began drawing comics and illustrations at $250 and $450 each for the publication. In those years, President Jimmy Carter and California governor Jerry Brown were talking about conservation and limitations to growth (both, it turns out, soon to be politically unpopular positions), and the magazine offered a national forum for a more Earth-friendly way of living and thinking. Earnest, communitarian—the opposite of *Punk* on its surface but, like the blue-jeans-and-leather crowd, seeking another way of living inside late capitalism. Alongside articles on solar technology, woodworking, plant cultivation, and philosophy, production manager Susan

Goodrick, who was a partner in Apex Novelties with her boyfriend, Don Donahue, commissioned new work by some of the old underground crew.

For *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Robert was split between trying to reengage the antic cartooning of the late 1960s and the more meditative nonfiction of Pekar's *American Splendor*. He drew two covers—one a balletic image of women tilling the soil, and the other a head-exploded factory worker with swastikas for pupils. He also completed a four-page report about "Space Day Symposium," a much-ballyhooed conference about forthcoming innovations from NASA and the aerospace industry. Robert was deeply alienated by what he saw as the inevitable militarization of the science, as well as the naive embrace of the burgeoning tech industry by his publisher Stewart Brand along with other environmentalists. Much of the work in *CoEvo* offers middling glimmers of his talent. There are one-page strips like "Mr. Nostalgia" that parody his own "everything was better in the past" persona; his best traditional effort is the strip most influenced by Harvey Pekar: the four-page "Kansas City Frank Melrose in 'Pass the Jug'" is an imagined vignette in the Chicago pianist's life that summons the mostly unknowable life in between performances for these long-gone musicians—a friendly visitor, the scuffed wood floor, the crackly radio, and a bottle hidden in the piano. And while Robert was a misfit among misfits and respected the magazine, he felt, based on reader and staff reaction, like he was too negative for a journal full of idealists who hoped for uplift.

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The spring 1978 issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly* carried this announcement from production manager Susan Goodrick:

> **R. Crumb in big trouble with IRS**

> Shafted by crooked lawyers. Needs $35,000 to clear debt. Wants to sell entire estate all at once. Consists of fabulous collection of pre-war 78 RPM records—jazz, blues, country and ethnic. Prime comic book collection, hundreds of esoteric magazines, books, and other printed matter. Old packages, old toys, dolls and robots. Several dozen pages of original art work and other things. Knick-Knacks (Aline is tired of dusting them anyway) and other household items. 35 G's takes all. Serious inquiries only. R. Crumb, c/o CoEvolution Quarterly, Box 428, Sausalito, CA 94965.

Robert's willful naivete had finally caught up with him. He hadn't paid income taxes since at least 1973 and by 1976 he owed $33,000, including penalties. Because he'd failed to respond to a notice in May 1977, the agency drained $2,102.78 from his and Aline's joint account, leaving them with $200 to cover their living expenses, and soon began seizing his royalty payments as well—$800 from the Rip Off Press, $200 from the Print Mint, $3,000 from Steve Krantz Productions. The untaxed income dated from before his legal separation from Dana (itself a disputed date: Robert said 1970; Dana said 1974), so the IRS began making noises about taking Potter Valley. Panicked, Dana sought to divert attention by reporting that Robert had hidden assets from the government. By the summer of 1977, he was the subject of a special investigation by the IRS. Thanks to a forensic accountant and a persistent lawyer, not to mention a very patient and supportive Aline, who spent countless days with him in their lawyer's office in downtown San Francisco, Robert managed to avoid being prosecuted for tax fraud, but his tab was now close to $50,000.

Big spenders didn't come through from the *CoEvo* ad, but he got some press attention, which meant that he started to receive donations: $100 each from cartoonists Jules Feiffer and Milton Caniff; $1,000 from the POINT Foundation (publishers of *The Whole Earth Catalog* et al.); $800 from Wavy Gravy's Hog Farm commune; and even contributions from "guys in the service," winding up with $8,500 in donations by mid-1978. Timothy Leary, whom Robert had once fundraised for but later made fun of, was not so generous, writing to the magazine, “For almost two decades Crumb has put out more aesthetic pollutants, more glorification of ugliness, pessimism, derogation of the human spirit than anyone I can think of. He is more of a menace than nuclear plants.”

A new publisher, Bélier Press, founded by an expert on printed erotica named J. B. Rund, had already come in strong in 1976 with a $20,000 advance for the anthology that would be called *Carload O’ Comics*, and then netted Robert over $10,000 in artwork sales by the end of 1977. Rund also helped Robert collect royalties for work printed in France, which, along with regular payments from his German publisher, Zweitausendeins, kept him above water. The press was pretty sympathetic, and Robert himself faced another uncontrolled exposure. He told a reporter, “It’s kind of humiliating, because I don’t really feel that bad off, not like some Indian being persecuted by the police.”

At the suggestion of their accountant, on January 11, 1978, Robert and Aline were married at the Woodland courthouse by a judge wearing a powder-blue leisure suit. At the time, Aline was cavalier about it in a letter to Betsy: “Well Bob & I did get married last January, mainly to save several thousand a year on taxes.” They agreed that theirs would remain an open marriage, so long as the core of their partnership remained solid. They each would have their own adventures and return to one another, no questions asked. “There is an art to an arrangement of this kind,” Robert wrote. “Not everyone can do it. It takes some finessing, some sensitivities to pull it off.”

In April 1978, Aline’s mother and stepfather threw the couple a proper wedding reception in New York so that her friends could kvell over them. Years later, Aline recounted the event: “My cousin asked me if she could give us a small reception… so we said OK, reluctantly. When we got there she had invited 200 people. It was the height of bad Jewish taste. I lapsed into Jewish jokes. No one laughed.

Here we were being waited on by Black servants. It was embarrassing. I took them aside. I apologized for exploiting them. A big Black man said, ‘Here, honey, let me pour you a stiff drink. Just relax and enjoy the party. We’re getting paid. This is a good job for us.’ Bob refused to stand behind the cake, so the Black woman who was with the catering service had to pick him up and hold him behind the cake while they took his picture. It was awful. I loved it.” In the photographs they look happy and healthy: Robert, who never seemed to age, and Aline, beaming, strong and proud. They were finding some solidity in the chaos.

For their honeymoon, they flew to Hamburg to meet with Zweitausendeins, who had proposed a series of books publishing Robert’s sketchbooks, with a $4,855 advance against royalties. Later that year *R. Crumb Sketchbook: November 1974 to January 1978* was published, offering readers over three hundred pages of drawings, culled from a half-dozen notebooks. Robert composed this book as he would a comic—he edited out all the text-only pages, sometimes touched up drawings and omitted others he felt weren’t good enough for print. Once his sketchbooks were printed in such depth, his relationship to them changed. They became, going forward, the repository of numerous finished drawings, growing ever more elaborate as demand for the work kept up. There was pressure now to turn this private space for thinking into a public document for his fans. Zweitausendeins eventually released a total of seven beautifully printed volumes covering 1966 to 1996.

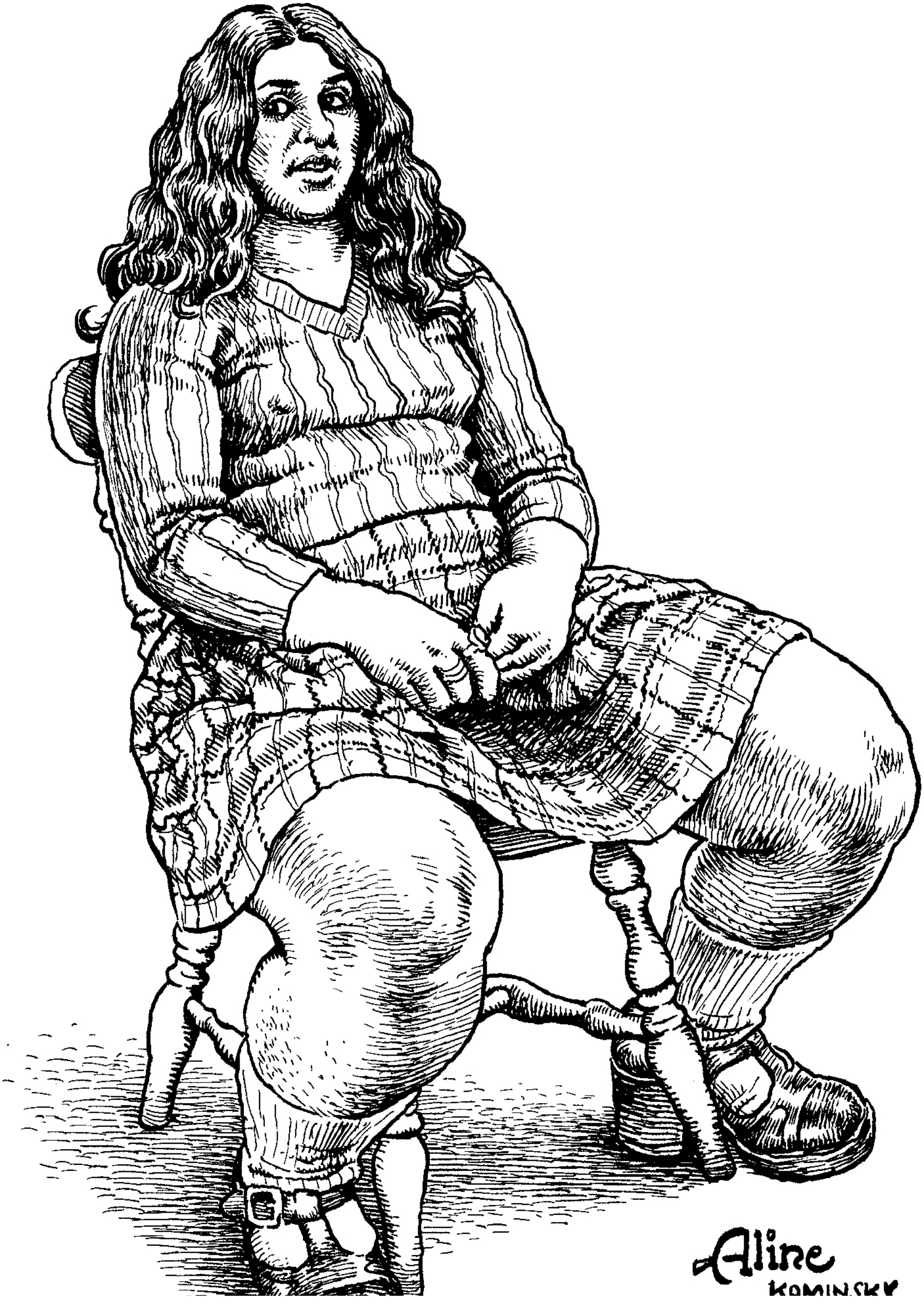
On August 21, 1978, back in California and having gathered every cent they could, Robert and Aline made the last payment of $3,000 cash to a very sympathetic IRS agent in Sacramento who said he himself had been harassed by the very agency he worked for. When it was all over, Robert’s lawyer told him it was the hardest case he’d ever handled, that he’d narrowly avoided prison. The end of his tax troubles, the final closure of his divorce, and his creative ruts were all further proof, if Robert needed any, that his life had spun out for a while. He needed to simplify.

The Cheap Suit Serenaders, still an enjoyable collaboration for Robert, was quickly slipping away from being recreation and into a job. In the spring of 1975, the band, now with Terry Zwigoff, cut its third record for Nick Perls in Berkeley. Nineteen seventy-six was particularly busy for the group, with a brief tour that culminated in a performance at New York's Top of the Gate room at the Village Gate. Robert set aside a front-row table for Aline's mother and stepfather. He glanced over at them in the first few minutes, and they smiled up at him. Twenty minutes later, they were asleep at the table. The tunes just weren't their speed. After the show, Robert was thronged with fans and reporters, while the rest of the Suits packed up and left. Robert, overwhelmed by the attention, eventually slipped away, but was followed back to Nick Perls's home by an eager young man peppering him with questions. He kept talking as Robert squeezed through Perls's front door. Fairly or not, Robert felt deserted by his bandmates and that he was carrying the burden of the band on his shoulders. He had to deal with the fans, the media demands, and the pressure to be both public musician and cartoonist. It wore on him. It had become a job, and that meant it was just about to end.

In 1978, the band released their third record, aptly titled *Number Three*. Of the fourteen songs, two were originals, including "Suits Crybaby Blues" (sample lyric: "Nobody likes our music, they all want stuff that's loud, don't get along with the folkies, we don't fit with the Disco Crowd"). They'd added two more members, Tom Marion and Bob Brozman, and everyone, save Robert, was aiming to make it a little bigger. Practicing and recording the record became the band's undoing. Armstrong remembered: "In one instance while rehearsing a number in Terry's basement for recording the next day Tom became very obstinate and refused to play a particular passage the way the rest of us wanted. Uncharacteristically, Crumb grew enraged with Tom and wound up throwing his banjo on the cement floor and running out the door. He called us hours later from a pay phone to apologize, but things were never the same after that. We knew that Crumb's heart wasn't into spending so much time with the band although he enjoyed our company individually." As usual, despite his bond with his friends, he didn't like feeling the pull of commitment, and he was, of course, always the primary attraction. He was being forced to make a career decision—music or art. He knew he was a far better artist than he was a musician, and that he was better off keeping the art as the moneymaking pursuit and music as a pleasure. He hated the thought that pursuing the band might ruin the enjoyment of music for him. Aline, too, was happy about the decision —it meant Robert wouldn't be traveling so much. The band continued without him, and the core of Armstrong, Dodge, and Zwigoff found their own projects, as well. In 1976, Zwigoff had taken a job at the department of social services as a social services eligibility worker, which he retained until the early 1980s, as he gradually began working on a documentary about one of the last living musicians of the 78 records era, Howard "Louie Bluie" Armstrong.

At the time, Robert said, "I'm looking forward to a little peace of mind for awhile, but I'm skeptical… this whole [tax] ordeal has left me a bitter man… I don't trust America… not one little bit… it seems that this society is out to get me… fortunately, I have a few trustworthy business associates so that I'm not forced to 'go on the bum' if it comes down to a choice between that or 'selling out'…" Instead, in 1978, he and Aline rented a house in Winters about six miles off the main drag, on Central Lane, a winding road that flows out of the town and dead-ends in the countryside. The house was on two and a half flat acres surrounded by hills and in a bit of a rough state when they moved in. They fixed it up, enlarging and painting the porch pink and blue, adding cheerful landscaping and a few kitsch pink flamingos for good measure. They tended to almond trees, a large fig tree, and a chicken coop in the backyard; soon they planted eucalyptus trees along the street and oaks around the property, giving the place privacy and shade. Winters was mostly cowboys, a few idealistic students, Mexican immigrants, and orchard farmers. Sure, there were some hippies a half hour east at UC Davis, and a small scene still farther away in Sacramento, but it was a ways along back roads and through the small towns that dotted the area in between. Both Robert and Aline were more comfortable outside of urban areas; neither ever lived in a city after 1969. This was the mode they wanted.

In the latter part of the 1970s, Robert returned to drawing with a renewed vigor. Living a more stable day-to-day life with Aline, the pause in his comics-making and shift to music opened up time for him to just work on his drawing technique. Since moving to the Central Valley, Robert had spent an enormous amount of time drawing in his sketchbook: trees, an irrigation ditch, the yard, the kitchen, the living room, Main Street, and countless portraits of Aline, and even copying from Breughel and Bosch, all with an intense focus on both fidelity to life and improving on his ink-drawing technique. In his studio he would set up a still life and draw from that, or draw another cartoonist's work, just to try out the fluid moves of, for example, sword and sorcery illustrator Frank Frazetta. In Davis, he would spend hours at Cafe Roma or the Blue Mango, cataloging everyone and everything around him—names, clothes, speech patterns, postures, eyeglasses, music. On trips to San Francisco he would sit in a café, often La Boheme at Twenty-Fourth and Mission, and make drawings of people at other tables. Working from photographs, he learned to “cheat”—to subtly exaggerate things so that a character comes alive—the tilt of a head, a sneer, stony teeth beneath crinkled lips. Images of gnarled American cities and the desiccated domiciles they housed were available to him in a scrapbook (or “morgue” in the cartoonists’ parlance) Robert assembled of clippings and photos he’d commissioned of the American urban landscape, so that the improbable complexity of American city streets could be used for backgrounds instead of the ingrained tropes from old comics and films. These details, which often bypass our consciousnesses in life and media, act as subconscious cues in a visual narrative. They ground the reader in a place and a time without her even realizing it.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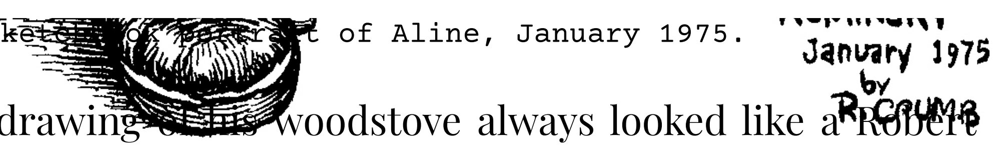


Sketchbook portrait of Aline, January 1975.

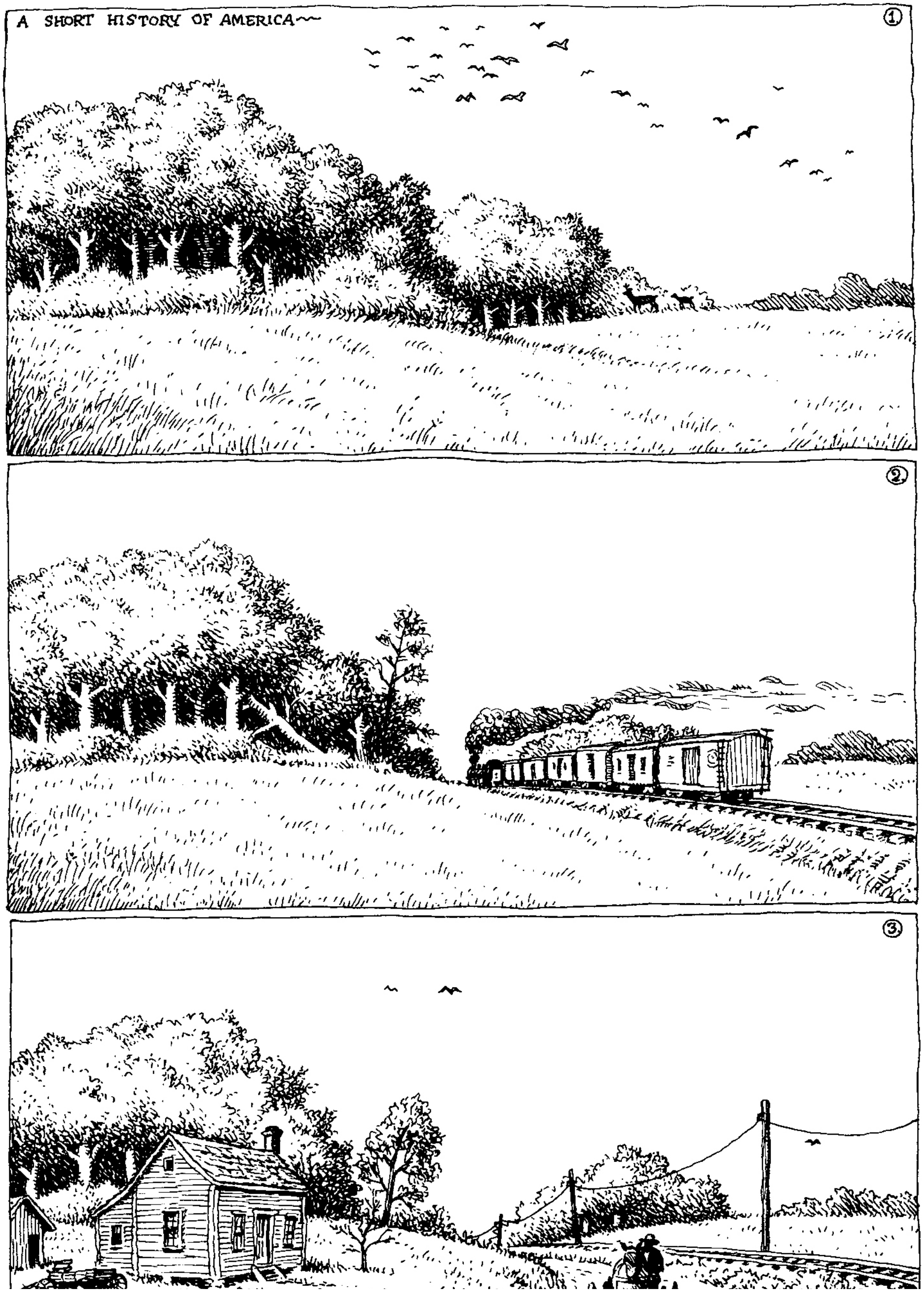
As ever, a drawing of his woodstove always looked like a Robert Crumb drawing of a woodstove. The marks his hand makes are instantly recognizable, no matter the subject. It was a matter of getting them back to the exactitude he desired. He also happened on the 1967 book *Cartooning the Head and Figure* by Jack Hamm, and devoted pages to trying out different historic styles—Deco, minimal, quick-draw—in order to achieve a regular and fluid cartooning mode.

All of this sober, contemplative practice was first evident in “A Short History of America,” published in *CoEvolution Quarterly* number 23 in 1979. It is a twelve-panel sequence that tracks the changes in an eighteenth-century Edenic meadow rolling to a lush forest, birds in flight. The meadow gradually changes from panel to panel, signaling we are in the same place first through the placement of the trees and the gentle slope. Then a railroad line appears, then a farmhouse and barn, then a dirt road between the house and the tracks, and some utility poles and telegraph wires; eventually a trolley car and stores; finally, in its twelfth panel, a latticework of wires, loud signs, big cars, and rickety modern structures. It is a formal marvel. In most comics, we follow a protagonist through places drawn in panels, the sequence of which marks the passage of time. Here the protagonist is the place itself, and the progression of years is evident in the changing images. There is no text, no sound effects, or any other notations. All of the information is in the drawing of the place itself, which is precisely made, pulling from Robert’s observations and his own files of photographs and ephemera. “A Short History of America” was a breakthrough for Robert, showing him that he could still push the language of comics while sending a clear and empathetic warning that “progress” comes at a great cost and the environment was in danger. Underneath this warning is a deep nostalgia for a time before Robert's birth, as well as a clear sense of the brevity of his own life in the larger scheme of history.

Like so much in his work, "A Short History of America" is built on his own past. In a 1980 letter to Ward Kimball, Robert writes, "'Short History of America' has been very popular since it first came out and has been reprinted lots of places… guess I should cash in on it… when I wuz in high school I used to spend my 'study hall' periods doing drawings like that… I'd draw a primal scene and then gradually add stuff to it, erasing and changing it 'til it became modern times… sometimes I'd make it an aerial view, with just some natural terrain from above, like a map, with waterways, etc… then I'd make roads start to appear, a city would evolve… sometimes I'd end it by having a big nuclear crater in the middle… a 'post-war' teenage mind."

Small-town existence was good for Robert's work and life. He and Aline became a part of the community. She, especially, thrived: "I always could relate to regular people," she said. "And that was very useful to me in a lot of ways. I sincerely liked a lot of those people." She remembered, "We used to walk around at night the first summer we were there, and these old houses, the lights would be on and we'd just look in and old people would be in the houses. It was like another century. Robert and I were so fascinated by that. And then we got to know old people in that town and talk to them and everything. And it was just this slice of the past, this orderly quiet life that nobody cared about. There were all these beautiful buildings, an old church, a movie theater. That was very appealing after being in this crazy hippie thing for years where it was just constant chaos, messes and chaos."

Robert drew semi-autobiographical comics about his life with Aline starring two cute little bears as their stand-ins: the Bearzy Wearzies. They offer a glimpse into their lives: walking, talking, bathing, strength testing, drinking, and generally being adults together. They did a lot of that in those final years of the 1970s. He wrote to Marty Pahls, “We talk and talk and talk. If I get a clear enough grasp of something to express it, I usually end up telling Aline about it. And, of course, she can discourse endlessly on any subject… Conferring, brainstorming, is a kind of group, or collective concentration… Writing like this is another type of concentration, which I like to do just to try to get a clear perception of things. The process of writing itself slows you down, so that your mind is forced to stay focused on the subject at hand, and in this way, you come up with more views on the subject, and often have break throughs of comprehension.”


A SHORT HISTORY OF AMERICA~~
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"A Short History of America," *CoEvolution Quarterly* no. 24, Fall 1979.

They didn't have a car, so Robert and Aline would ride bikes into town. Aline took three hours of ballet and four hours of exercise a week, plus ran three times a week, and soon, having taken a Jane Fonda fitness training course, she taught exercise classes in the Winters Community Center, for about fifty students, five days a week, for around $30 or $35 a class. In return for a little cash or more often in trade for firewood, goods, or discounts, Robert drew Christmas cards and birth announcements for friends, and advertisements for local businesses. Having learned quite a bit from *CoEvolution Quarterly* and spent time reading about farming and agriculture, he also began working with *Winds of Change*, a tabloid paper founded in Davis in 1979. It was an outgrowth of the Appropriate Technology movement, rooted in the ideas of sustainability and community building described by economist E. F. Schumacher in his book *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered. Winds of Change* opposed the growing trend of industrial farming companies buying up land, displacing communities, and using, for example, DDT on the crops, poisoning the land and the workers. Residing in what was once the "Breadbasket of California," Robert heard the conversations in the coffee shop, knew farmers, and recognized the purely capitalist motivations behind the industrial rhetoric proclaiming the importance of large-scale progress over local concerns.

Robert channeled Thomas Nast's nineteenth-century political cartooning in a series of seven dramatic covers for the paper. In one, the paper's mascot, Mr. Appropriate, holds a sword labeled "high ideals" facing off with a hellish machine labeled "AGRI-BU$INE$$ JUGGERNAUT." He also briefly produced a new tabloid-sized comic cowritten with a local organic farmer called *Mr. Appropriate*, in which our hero battled various nefarious businessmen, including the city council of nearby Woodland, in a well-reported comic strip about starting the local farmer's market. The paper doubled as a community organ, featuring articles on home birth and foraging, a barter/exchange column, and a monthly calendar. In 1981, Robert joined the staff as the art and layout editor, now adding hand-lettering, illustrations, a collaborative strip with Aline, and the design of the advertisements for local businesses and services. Aline, too, contributed to the paper, writing an exposé of the university's experimentation on animals and stridently campaigning against new developments and energy inefficiency. They kept at it until 1982, when it became more obligation than inspiration, and Robert started hearing noises that his imagery was too negative. Already volunteering, he didn't want to have to fight for his art as well. The paper itself lasted until 1984.

Robert Armstrong moved to Winters in the late 1970s, and he and Robert, along with some of the *Winds of Change* crew, put a band together called the Winds of Change All-Stars and kicked off with a benefit performance on the spring equinox of 1981. Soon that group morphed into the Rural Sophisticates, a low-key, strictly local band that played 1920s–40s jazz and dance music, mostly at weddings and parties. "We played at least a hundred weddings," Robert wrote. "It got so I could sense whether the marriage was going to work out or not just by observing the young couple at the wedding. A voice in my head would say, 'Nah, they're not gonna make it.'"

Aline, too, had been playing some music, usually duetting on guitar with Robert, strumming chords while he played lead on mandolin. In 1977, she decided to take up the fiddle and went looking for a teacher. She found Wally Summ, a young local born and raised in Woodland, the county farm center ten miles north of Davis. Aline began taking lessons in country fiddling from Wally, and she invited him over to her and Robert's house to listen to some string band 78s. On hearing the records, Wally told them about the Wild Family, who he said sounded like what was on the turntable. He'd known them since he was a kid and offered to bring the Crumbs to visit them. Robert remembers, "A week later, Wally led us to their farm in Zamora, about five miles outside of Woodland, out in the middle of windswept fields and marshes. The old wood-shingled farmhouse and outbuildings looked as if nothing had changed in sixty years. A 1948 Chevrolet pickup truck and a 1954 Pontiac sat in the farmyard. Chickens wandered around loose. The family met us out in front of the house, all dressed formally, the three brothers in white shirts and ties, the two sisters in floral-patterned dresses and old-fashioned black high-heeled shoes." After talking a bit, they welcomed their guests into their home, which was likewise unchanged—a veritable museum of Depression-era rural Americana. Soon the five siblings picked up their instruments and broke into the 1930 popular song "The Waltz You Saved for Me," which deeply moved Robert and Aline.

Winds of Change

©1980 - R. Crumb

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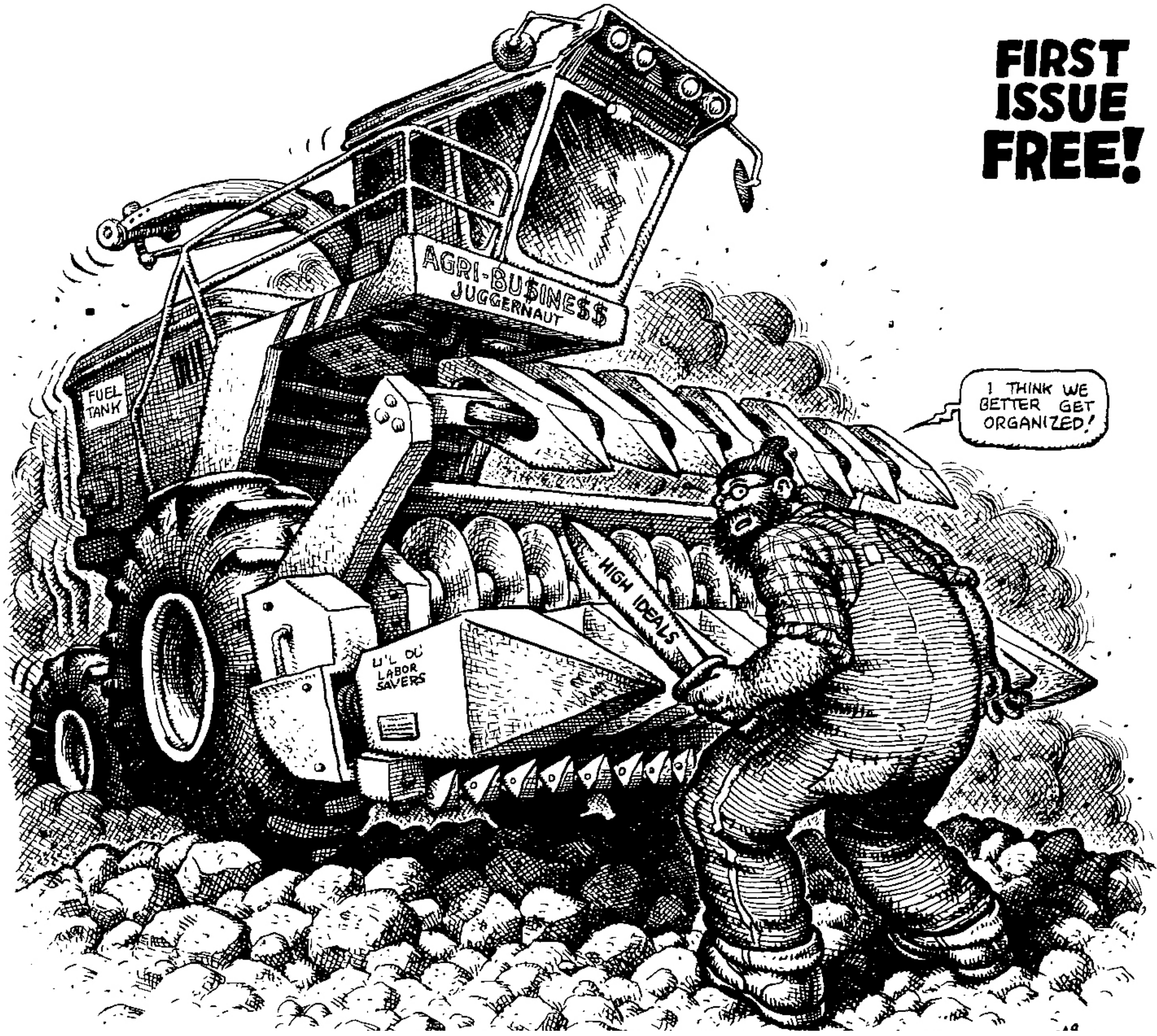
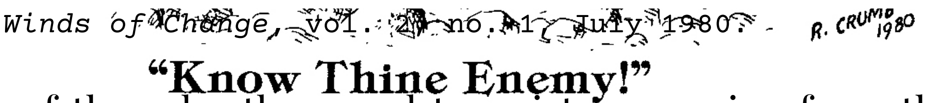
PRICE: 75 CENTS


AGRI-BU$INE$$ JUGGERNAUT
FUEL TANK
LI'L OL' LABOR SAVERS
HIGH IDEALS
I THINK WE BETTER GET ORGANIZED!

FIRST ISSUE FREE!


Winds of Change, vol. 2, no. 1, July 1980.
R. CRUMB 1980
"Know Thine Enemy!"

The family of three brothers and two sisters ranging from their late fifties to their late sixties had performed in the area as the Wild Family Orchestra since the early 1930s, sounding in the late 1970s as though someone dropped a needle on a German-tinged 78 dance record. Now in their seventies, the siblings hadn't left the Central Valley, where they lived in a farmhouse on 130 acres of land with a menagerie of chickens and stray cats, since 1947.

Aline began learning the violin with Claude Wild, and for the next few years she and Robert visited the family every Sunday for a lesson, followed by dinner and an evening of playing music together. Robert and Aline were fascinated—the family recounted their memories of the land and of the numerous groups that played music in the Central Valley, some of whom previously only existed as names on 78 record labels. Inspired by the interest among the young folk, the family recorded and released a one-off album on their own label, with design and assistance from Robert and Aline, in 1979. They also hosted music festivals each May for three years at the Zamora town hall; Robert, Aline, Armstrong, and friends would spend weeks decorating tables and making cards for each musical act—a solo a cappella singer, a ten-year-old-girl autoharp player, the Cheap Suit Serenaders, and anyone else game to play the old-time music. The days in Zamora were a safe harbor away from their lives as "the Crumbs." There was no concern for money, competition, publishing, fans, or reputation. It was a quiet emotional and mental space in which to rest and ride out the rest of the decade.

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CHAPTER 18

Weirdo

In June of 1981, Robert received an unexpected windfall: $31,897.49 for *Fritz the Cat* royalties for 1976–80 from Steve Krantz Productions, then winding down its operations and making a final payout. The Crumbs decided to use it as a down payment to buy their rental house, which they paid off over the next three years. Six years before, Aline had dreamed that she lived with Robert in a small white house in front of a California hillside: "We had a blonde, curly haired child. And it all came true. When we were driving around looking for houses to rent, we saw the house in Winters—that was the house in my dream." The child was Sophie Violet Crumb, born healthy and peacefully on September 27, 1981.

Both parents were initially ambivalent about trying to have a child, but Aline felt a powerful urge. She finished two issues of her vivid, hilarious autobiographical comic book *Power Pak* and was active in the community, but she wanted more. After Aline explained the mental illnesses and addiction in the Goldsmith and Crumb families, her doctor suggested she and Robert not have children. But she felt that they could do better than their parents. On Sophie's four-month birthday, Aline sent a photograph and letter to her friend Betsy Klein: "Sophie is 4 months old today. She's not very fat, kind of tall & as you can see very pale, a definite 'Crumb,' does not look at all Jewish… blue-gray eyes… Hope she gets Dad's tall skinny bod & flawless skin… was born with a full head o' hair. We had a perfect birth… I was so thrilled & surprised after nightmare experience when I was a teen… labor 3 ½ hours… had a wonderful middle-aged midwife, Karen, a tough cookie but sweet with healing hands, had her in the hospital alternative 'homestyle' program (a typical California aberration, but a good one), no men were present except Bob, who did a great job of breathing with me. Bob is equally sharing Sophie's care… I'm teaching exercise classes & he watches her & he's still drawing… Sophie is a bit fussy but is extremely charming & sleeps 12 hrs every night. 10 to 10. Has been doing this since 4 weeks!!"

Aline loved Sophie so much it hurt; she had no model for these maternal feelings and no one who understood her confusion—enraptured but resentful of the child's needs. Robert found that he, too, was pulled to her, surprised by the ardor of his feelings: "My first impression of Sophie was of an extremely vigorous energy and a highly revved-up nervous system. Half Aline, half me. It was love at first sight, the first time in my life that I felt a selfless love."

Hers was a childhood neither he nor Aline had ever had. Robert listened to her, recorded her childish imagination in loose comic strips, drew many portraits of her. Caring for Sophie was, as Robert wrote to Charles, "time consuming." "Aline often goes off and I have to take care of the little twerp… I actually enjoy taking care of her, but often the whole day is gone by the time I get to 'escape' to my studio out here in the barn… it's been good for me taking care of the Soph—it's a practice in real patience and humility for an egotistic artiste such as me—some people, mostly women, are largely oriented towards taking care of babies—but for someone of my temperament, it's a trial. Something in me weeps with frustration while I'm minding the baby, something in me is boiling over with turmoil… I always want to be 'accomplishing' something big and important every minute, and taking care of a baby is a *very* mundane, unimportant task. So, while I'm churning inside about not being at work at something more 'significant,' I also am aware that this is probably good for me—it's a 'real life' experience—the source of inspiration for all 'great work' comes from real life—and at the same time I'm enjoying the little creature, because she's so cute and lovable and bright, full of life, high-spirited…"

He and Aline were, as all parents do, struggling with the time they each needed, each feeling pulled away from their work. Robert often felt that his "work" was most important of all—even as he hated himself for thinking that. He sometimes wished Aline was more of an earth mother type who would defer to his greatness, but then quickly realized it was precisely the fact that she could take care of herself, could in fact have an independent life, that made their marriage work. But with Sophie, and with any children, he could zip back to his own child self and relate on their level. He would spend two or three hours a day playing Barbies with Sophie as she got older, immersed in their shared story, just as he once had been with Charles. Sophie remembers: "He wasn't really famous when I was little. When I was little, we lived in a tiny little house, we didn't have money. Even for a kid, I was really unaware of the reality of the situation. I was really in my little world. It was like us three against the world is kind of how it felt like to me. I spent a lot of time making paper dolls, and making forts in nature, just drawing, and watching old cartoons."

When Sophie was born her half brother, Jesse, was thirteen. He was a big kid, bright and eager, but unaware of his own strength and prone to sudden anger. In the late seventies Dana married a biologist named Urmas Kaldveer who had two children of his own and seems to have had a contemptuous attitude toward Jesse. After a few years of little contact, Dana began writing to Robert telling him Jesse wanted to get to know him, and eventually that she was having to prevent violence between her husband and her son. So in 1982 a fourteen-year-old Jesse came to Winters for a week to meet his new half sister and see Robert and Aline for the first time in seven years. He never warmed to Aline, and viewed Sophie as both competition and proof of his own abandonment. Robert and Aline didn't have the room or the money for him to suddenly move in and begin a new life. The timing and the emotional tensions were all wrong. So he went back to, and remained in, Potter Valley.

By the end of the 1970s, the underground cartoonists were still drawing, albeit for diminishing returns. Jay Lynch told an interviewer he couldn't afford to be an underground cartoonist anymore. He was working for *Playboy* and taking illustration jobs. Justin Green was getting by as a sign painter in Sacramento. Rory Hayes and Jim Osborne, among others, were fading into drugs and poverty. Art Spiegelman was back in New York working on *Maus* and planning a new anthology. Bill Griffith was self-syndicating his weekly comic strip, *Zippy the Pinhead*, to the then-new alternative weekly publications: advertiser-supported free local papers that focused mostly on culture and events, with some political reporting. The remaining publishers survived in their own ways: Last Gasp by publishing *Zap* and distributing other titles, and Kitchen Sink through reprinting classic comics; thanks to a $250,000 *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* film deal with Universal, the Rip Off Press was still solvent. The Print Mint and Apex Novelties were no longer releasing new books. All the other small operations were long gone. The counterculture wave the cartoonists had ridden had dissipated.

Ronald Reagan, who had advocated particularly violent crackdowns on the 1960s protest movements as governor of California, was the front-runner for the presidency, promising shiny new weapons, cuts to public services, and a united front of evangelical Christians, the working class, and the military. Reagan's election would be the strongest rebuke yet to the dreams of the 1960s. As one cartoonist put it, "We must remember that yesterday's bright-eyed revolutionaries are tomorrow's lawnmowers. Huey

Newton lives in a high rise. Eldridge Cleaver is a born-again Christian. Tim Leary is waiting for a spaceship. Patty Hearst is sorry she ever got mixed up in the whole thing. The climate that spawned comix is not 'me, my, mine'—fuck you buddy."

Zap continued at an excruciatingly slow pace: only nine issues had come out by 1980. Now approaching or past forty, the *Zap* crew were all on different paths, converging for jams and release parties but no longer a unified force. Gilbert Shelton was writing the *Freak Brothers* screenplay and drawing ever more elaborate stories of the stoned trio. Victor Moscoso was turning out album covers, the occasional poster, and working on animation jobs; after a run of Grateful Dead–related projects, Rick Griffin had gone the way of many hippies and found religion—he was a born-again Christian laboring over luminous devotional illustrations for the Gospel of John. Robert didn't see him much but always respected the strength of his beliefs and ability to render his visions so vividly and beautifully. Robert Williams was steady. His psychedelic-realist paintings were ambitious, vibrant works, which Williams sold directly to eager collectors. S. Clay Wilson embraced his own mythology as an art outlaw, drew exquisitely debauched illustrations for William S. Burroughs, and took commissions to make the rent. His prodigious drinking made it impossible for Robert to maintain a close friendship with him.

Zap only continued because Robert respected and treasured Spain Rodriguez too much to let him down. Spain was neither competitive nor needy with Robert. He was a rock-solid friend and cartoonist. He worked all the time—for causes, for porn, for magazines, for himself—and he took no shit, keeping Robert intellectually alert: "He was always funny. At the same time, he was a serious left-winger. And if I wanted to get it straight in my head about what it really meant to be left-wing, Spain could explain. His class allegiances were very clear. I once asked Spain why Broadway musical comedies were so lame, they're so irritating and annoying, corny. Without missing a beat, Spain replied: it's 'because they're bourgeois.' Oh, of course."

Spain was the only contributor other than Shelton who could regularly produce material. Waiting for the others, for whom narrative comics were not as natural a fit, slowed *Zap* dramatically. Had it opened up to more contributors, there would have been more issues, but it would have disrupted the notion of *Zap* as the premier swaggering rock band of the underground scene. Robert didn't share those concerns, but he was loyal to Spain. So it stayed as it was.

Mostly, *Zap* made Robert feel like a relic of the sixties, a feeling that only increased when he agreed that Donald Fiene, a forty-nine-year-old professor of Russian language and literature at the University of Tennessee, could produce a comprehensive scholarly bibliography of his work to date. The research, and the memories, left him alternately flattered and convinced of his own obsolescence. He looked around for inspiration outside of his current vehicles, and even his usual circles, and found it in both *Punk* and a zine called the *Tele Times*, primarily assembled by an artist named B. N. Duncan, that published prose, poetry, photography, drawings, and cartoons by the unhoused, transient, or marginal characters in Berkeley. Duncan himself was a natural cartoonist, his loping line delineating his own BDSM sexual obsession with an almost naive grace, honesty, and wit. First-person spelunking into a vibrant folk world is just what Robert craves in media, not to mention a fidelity to the truth, no matter how difficult or uncomfortable.

Robert saw in both publications what he wanted for himself: a cheap, easy-to-produce vision of culture. He also needed, as ever, some kind of cohort to commune with. The idea came to him while meditating in November 1980: "I'll start another magazine and I'll be the editor! There is not going to be a co-editor and it won't be a cooperative [like *Zap*]. I'm going to call the shots. I'm going to decide what goes in. That way I can get it out as often as I think I can handle, which turned out to be three times a year.” More specifically, Robert decided to put something together that would not attempt, as *Arcade* did, to provide a life raft for advanced comics. He wanted to make something of his own that could contain and attract the scrappy, unschooled, ground-level expression he treasured.

Last Gasp agreed to publish what was now called *Weirdo* so long as Robert drew all of the covers. In March 1981 ten thousand copies of *Weirdo* number 1 stumbled out into the world. The cover design zipped right back to the primordial American graphic past by picturing a version of “Kilroy Was Here”—the ubiquitous head peeking over a fence first drawn by US soldiers overseas as a sign of their presence during World War II, and later as common as the smiley face. Robert inverted the mark, rendering the face pockmarked and slobbering. What had been a wartime icon of triumph was now christened “Etaoin Shrdlu,” a moniker picked up from Harvey Kurtzman and the words used to designate a mistake in analog typesetting. Surrounding this abject image are borders modeled on the Kurtzman’s *Mad* and *Humbug* cover designs, filled with miniature tableaux in the worst possible taste—naked humans linked by cascading scrolls labeled “sexism ’n’ racism,” “big legs,” “mutants,” “tedium,” “psychosis,” and so on. On the inside front cover, welcoming readers to the 1980s is a photograph of Robert wearing a propeller beanie and novelty eyeglasses.

Far from the zany hijinks of the *Zap* days, Robert’s hand-lettered editorial is simultaneously a call to arms and an acknowledgment of inevitable defeat: “Hi there guys ’n’ gals! Here we go again, people, another new magazine, another *Mad* imitation, another small-time commercial venture with high hopes, obviously doomed to failure. But what the heck, *Weirdo* will have a good-looking corpse, as the saying goes. Seriously though, as we enter a more conservative era, with the Republicans taking over the government (those dirty scoundrels, those jackals, those snakes, pigs, assholes, slimy, two-faced wreckers of civilization, stealers of food from the mouths of women and children, etc.), and in keeping with this new mean mood, new approaches are called for. We 'artistes' on the frayed fringe of the culture must take the bull by the horns and put our shoulder to the wheel… we must be on guard against being too arty, too far out… we must make an effort to get our message across to the average guy… we must do these things if we wish our little magazines to succeed, if we want to keep our little enterprizes [*sic*] afloat, if we want to pay the rent… if we want to MAKE MONEY like everybody else in this era of bared fangs we're entering! But *Weirdo* will not be crass, will not pander to the lowest common denominator, will not be pornographic, will not jump on the latest bandwagons or fads. No, *Weirdo* will be a commercial failure…"

Next to this was the promise of a new column: "Advice to the Lovelorn, by Prof. T.E. Zwigoff," which the notoriously curmudgeonly Zwigoff wrote and "answered" for the next bunch of issues. The back cover was a finely rendered version of a Brooke Shields Calvin Klein advertisement, the teen model thickened to Robert's proportions, mouth filled with a semenlike substance, an indignant expression on her face, as though assuring readers that despite his earnest editorial Robert could still wreak abject havoc on the commercial heart of America.

Between the covers, the first issue of *Weirdo* gathered what Robert wanted to surface: drawings by the then-unknown Polish artist Stanislav Szukalski on the nature of mankind; B. N. Duncan's comics about sadomasochism; a center spread reproducing "The Witch of Malleghem" by "Pete Brueghel" under the heading "Old Timers Department"; and two photo-funnies—sex farces inspired by the Mexican photonovelas readily available at local markets in the Central Valley, as well as the racy narratives of midcentury girlie magazines like *Titter* and *Flirt*. These stories, comprised of photographs and hand-lettered captions and backgrounds, were simple sex farces: men taking pratfalls, acting like horny clowns, the snappy text full of puns and jokes. Photo funnies were also a staple of *Help!* in the 1960s—Robert himself appeared in one for Harvey Kurtzman—as well as the *National Lampoon* in the 1970s. Unlike those more general humor publications, *Weirdo*'s version was rooted in the kinks of its creator. Robert came up with the scenarios, usually featuring a "creep" like himself involved with the powerful women he so desired, inevitably getting into a fracas that would show off female strength and flexibility. Robert relished the new challenge of making coherent, if silly, stories, and even more so the goofy, festive photo sessions populated by Aline, local friends, and the occasional amateur model. In most reviews and correspondence, readers found his photo funnies, which ran for only eight issues, self-indulgent, and, in the ultimate fan putdown, a waste of space. Robert didn't much care—he was having fun.

On the margins for the first time since 1966, Robert returned to form in the magazine, beginning with the covers, which he developed by flipping through his sketchbooks looking for an image that was eye-catching and dynamic enough to inspire a larger composition in pencil and then, with a crow quill, support both his improvisations and obsessive crosshatching. The logo changed every issue (an idea inspired, again, by Kurtzman's *Humbug*), and more than half included his painstaking borders. The cover of issue 4 is a riff on Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, though here it's a nightmare vision of 1982: Christ is reading *Weirdo* as an IRS agent points to a bill; nefarious white men are stealing a vote from a Black man; oil executives conspire. Issue 7 features a head based on the painter Philip Guston's late-1960s and '70s iconography atop a Crumb cartoon body staring in awe at a woman jogging by. Guston's final decade of work had been inspired by much the same proletariat cartooning that Robert rediscovered during his 1966 revelation—big shoes and bulbous bodies rendered in scritchy-scratchy lines. While the two never met, their aesthetic breakthroughs were within a few years of each other, and perhaps most important, they shared a willingness to indict America and themselves in their artwork. Neither stood apart as a clean observer. Through their art both men insisted that there would be no purity, that we are all oppressor and oppressed.

Robert's editorial warning against being "too arty, too far out" was a subtle jab at the other major event in post-underground comics: Françoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman's *Raw*, which debuted in July of 1980. *Raw* was oversized, beautifully printed and bound, and sat next to the contemporary avant-garde publications emerging in the postmodern 1970s and '80s. The French-born Mouly, who married Spiegelman in 1977, felt that if the medium was going to continue to grow it needed a visual and cultural context to match. Innovative young cartoonists of the early 1980s were initially catalyzed by seeing *Zap*'s example that comics could contain any kind of material, no matter how personal, prosaic, or outrageous, and envisioned themselves continuing, in one form or another, what Robert and company had started. They just needed outlets. Mouly and Spiegelman mostly chose comics that used the form as a platform for Expressionist rendering, engaged with the form as a subject—say, making a narrative out of the component parts of a cartoon character—or were part of a new wave emerging from Europe that looked at the medium as a place for complex fictions drawn with elegance and precision. With the second issue, Spiegelman began serializing chapters of his graphic novel *Maus* as tipped-in booklets.

Raw and *Weirdo* were profoundly rooted in comic book history as twin legacies of Harvey Kurtzman, who was beloved by both Crumb and Spiegelman, and who in turn looked on them as his most promising progeny. *Raw* followed Kurtzman's attention to detail, firm editing, and cultural ambitions. *Weirdo* was closer, as Robert wrote, to a *Mad* knockoff, embracing the irreverence and graphic sensibility of his mentor.

Both of these anthologies found homes in a relatively new market: the comic book store. Stores had existed, like Gary Arlington's and Terry Zwigoff's, for a decade or more, but as isolated and precarious businesses. Since the 1930s, comic books were mostly available on newsstands and drugstore magazine racks. If a local vendor forgot to order a title or sold out, fans were out of luck. As with all periodicals, newsstands bought the comics on a returnable basis, so whatever went unsold was returned to the distributor for a credit and the publisher, in turn, would take the loss. It was a volume business, and small publishers with low output, like the Print Mint's attempts with *Arcade*, weren't worth the trouble for the distributors who controlled the newsstands. Beginning in 1973, partially inspired by the underground distribution model, a couple of entrepreneurs began buying comic books directly from DC, nonreturnable, and selling them to independent shops and the relatively young comic book specialty store market. For DC, and soon Marvel, this was a no-brainer: they could increase print runs and lower their exposure to returns. With this direct line to the major publishers, comic book stores began opening across America. At their best, these stores specialized in both the popular superheroes and independent publishers as well.

Dedicated comic-book-only distributors and stores meant that small publishers once again had a way to get their comics in front of adventurous fans. When the young Connecticut-based publisher Fantagraphics released the first issue of *Love and Rockets*—a chronicle of Mexican-American fantasy, working-class life, punk rock, and Central American intrigue by the Los Angeles–based brothers Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez—it could go right into comic book stores and find an audience ready for more grown-up fare. As a boy, Gilbert Hernandez saw Robert's work and thought, "This is it. This is the guy. He was writing about whatever he wanted, it was great cartooning, and he could be mean and naughty." *Love and Rockets* was as unlikely and unorthodox a comic as one could imagine in 1980, but the example of Robert's perseverance kept Hernandez moving against adversity, and the older cartoonist vocally endorsed his work.

If their work or their readers didn't make it into a comic book store, many artists found new venues and formats for their talents. In Los Angeles, Raymond Pettibon was making zines of his darkly funny EC-influenced drawings that autopsied the promise of the 1960s as surely as they skewered the new decade, while Gary Panter was fusing punk rock, underground absurdity, and painters like Jim Nutt and Peter Saul to make postapocalyptic science fiction comics that appeared in the punk newspaper *Slash*. College friends Matt Groening and Lynda Barry were both publishing satirical comic strips in the young alternative weeklies that replaced the underground press—*LA Weekly* and the *Chicago Reader*, among others. Barry's autobiographical comics were sparked by those of Justin Green, Robert, and Aline; she remembered discovering Robert in seventh grade. He gave her, she said, "this feeling that you could draw anything." Groening drew the philosophical *Life in Hell* for three decades; and created the cultural phenomenon that is *The Simpsons*. He first purchased *Zap* in 1968 from the aptly named store the Longhair Music Faucet. In Robert he found the first cartoonist who drew "stories that deal with fundamental unsolvable human problems: sex and desire, loneliness and love, aggression and anger, despair and terror—all executed in that freakishly talented Crumb style."

Robert, like Spiegelman and Mouly, was keeping up with these developments, and began expanding the scope of his magazine to include new cartoonists like Phoebe Gloeckner, for whom confessional autofiction was second nature. Growing up in San

Francisco, Gloeckner wasn't interested in comics until her discovery of the underground at age twelve. She later remembered reading Robert's "Joe Blow" from what was essentially a child's perspective: "[It] reminded me of Garth Williams. I loved *Charlotte's Web*, and other E. B. White stuff he illustrated, but that story, 'Joe Blow,' it's like you can just pick it up off the page. It's very… dimensional somehow, and for a kid, it's very appealing. It looks like a kid's book illustration." What seemed horrible to others imprinted on her and opened up a space for her to tell her own stories in the medium: "You could tell anything in comics, and a year or two later I started doing comics because there were things in my life I didn't want to talk about." She also idolized Aline's work. If Robert cleared a road, Aline offered a way to navigate it—here was a young woman drawing explicit comics about bad sex, poor self-esteem, and abuse. Gloeckner sent a fan letter to Winters but never expected much to come of it.

Then one night her mother, who was dating Robert Armstrong, took her along to see the Cheap Suit Serenaders play at the Magic Cellar. When she told Robert Crumb her daughter, Phoebe, was a big fan, he remembered her unusual name. Aline came over, and the three became friends, with Phoebe visiting them up north. She even dreamed of running away to live with these new surrogate artist parents who, she felt, actually understood her. She began publishing her autofiction comics of sexual abuse and street life in San Francisco in *Weirdo.* Dori Seda, a hard-partying, yarn-spinning autobiographical cartoonist, showed up in the third issue, and soon Aline, Armstrong, and many others followed. In nearly every issue (like *Arcade* and *Raw*) Robert included an archival section—modernist jazz cartoons by Gene Deitch, hillbilly postcards by Norman Pettingill, and the like. Robert was now consciously building his historical and contemporary contexts.

Assembling each issue of *Weirdo* at home in Winters was arduous work—Robert received the submissions, arranged for photostats, and then sequenced and designed the magazine. Once an issue was complete, he and Aline, now car owners, would drive the artwork down through the Central Valley, cross into the East Bay, pass Berkeley, cross the Bay Bridge, crawl through downtown, then head south to the Mission District until arriving at the Last Gasp office and warehouse. Ron Turner's desk was forever surrounded by piles of comics, bills, receipts, and correspondence. The crumbling walls were covered with carnival posters, original art, and the odd taxidermy. Contributors, including Robert, received roughly the same rate as a decade earlier: $50 a page and $25 for reprints. The audience and corresponding sales had dramatically shrunk. He would receive a lump sum from Last Gasp and then cut the checks for the contributors and any production costs.

For all the effort and spirit, *Weirdo* wasn't especially well-liked. Comic book readers prefer polish over crudeness and cheap printing. So while the meticulously produced *Raw* became a coveted object in bookstores, *Weirdo* could be found, as cartoonist Peter Bagge described, "in a box of old undergrounds in the basement of Forbidden Planet in New York City. There it was, already mixed in with old beat-up back issues of *Dr. Atomic* and *Tales of the Leather Nun*, even though it had just been released that month!" The letters to the magazine were occasionally encouraging but mostly negative, so Robert, martyrlike, would spend hours transcribing comments like "over-priced piece of shit" and "ugly" for each issue's letter column.

Even some of the contributors to *Weirdo* didn't like it, including one of the magazine's inspirations, B. N. Duncan. Another editor/artist would likely have simply ignored and dropped him, but Robert, going all the way back to his fandom days, liked to argue, wanted to tussle, especially with someone who could match his obsessive energy. His compulsively generous response to Duncan contains much of his aesthetic vision in those days:

> None of the people on the cover of *Weirdo* 4 are specific individuals except for Jesus… *Weirdo* 4 certainly didn't seem to live up to your expectations… "What's the point?" you ask… I don't really know what the point is… I go by my instincts in matters of art and comics… if something seems to hit home in some way that's entertaining, looks interesting and expresses a highly personal vision… I'm always scouring the culture for good cartoonists or artists that I can use in *Weirdo*… I'm not interested in stuff that's too slick or pro, or "cute"… I like the strong personal visionary stuff that generally doesn't fit in the mainstream… I suppose that's what makes the term "underground" still applicable… take your own work, for example… your cartoons are the quintessential "underground" art… I happen to believe that artists like you and… others in *Weirdo* are exploring their own feelings and subconscious in a way that you can't find in mainstream, commercial print media, and in the long run I believe this type of art will be looked at as a stronger statement of our time than more popular stuff…
>
> I think that the broad, popular culture forms were much healthier, say, 50 or 75 years ago… even 25 years ago, when Kurtzman was still doing *Mad* and *Humbug*, and the pop music scene was still somewhat dynamic. But now, all the best stuff is happening in fringe areas, and the mainstream has become very sterile. And the fringe stuff tends to be more acidic, more alienated, not as kind or soothing to the senses… perhaps this is why you mourn the lack of "good love stories" and "richly human" and "honestly patriotic" stories. This fringe culture is too alienated to fool around with such themes. *But*, it is *still* "richly human" in its own way!! It's just a little harder to digest.
>
> The *entire* American intelligentsia of the 1920s had absolutely *no idea* of the wonderful musical culture that was thriving right under their noses. The old-time country blues of Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson, a cultural form that was soon to die out because of economic and technological changes coming up fast. These cultured, "sophisticated" people totally ignored this music while they extolled the glories of European classical music, and perhaps gave American jazz a nodding glance of slight approval, that it perhaps had the potential of becoming a refined form of "real" music. The cultured people of that time had *very* strong fixations about "classical" artforms… only the "lowbrows" read comic strips or went to see Laurel & Hardy movies…

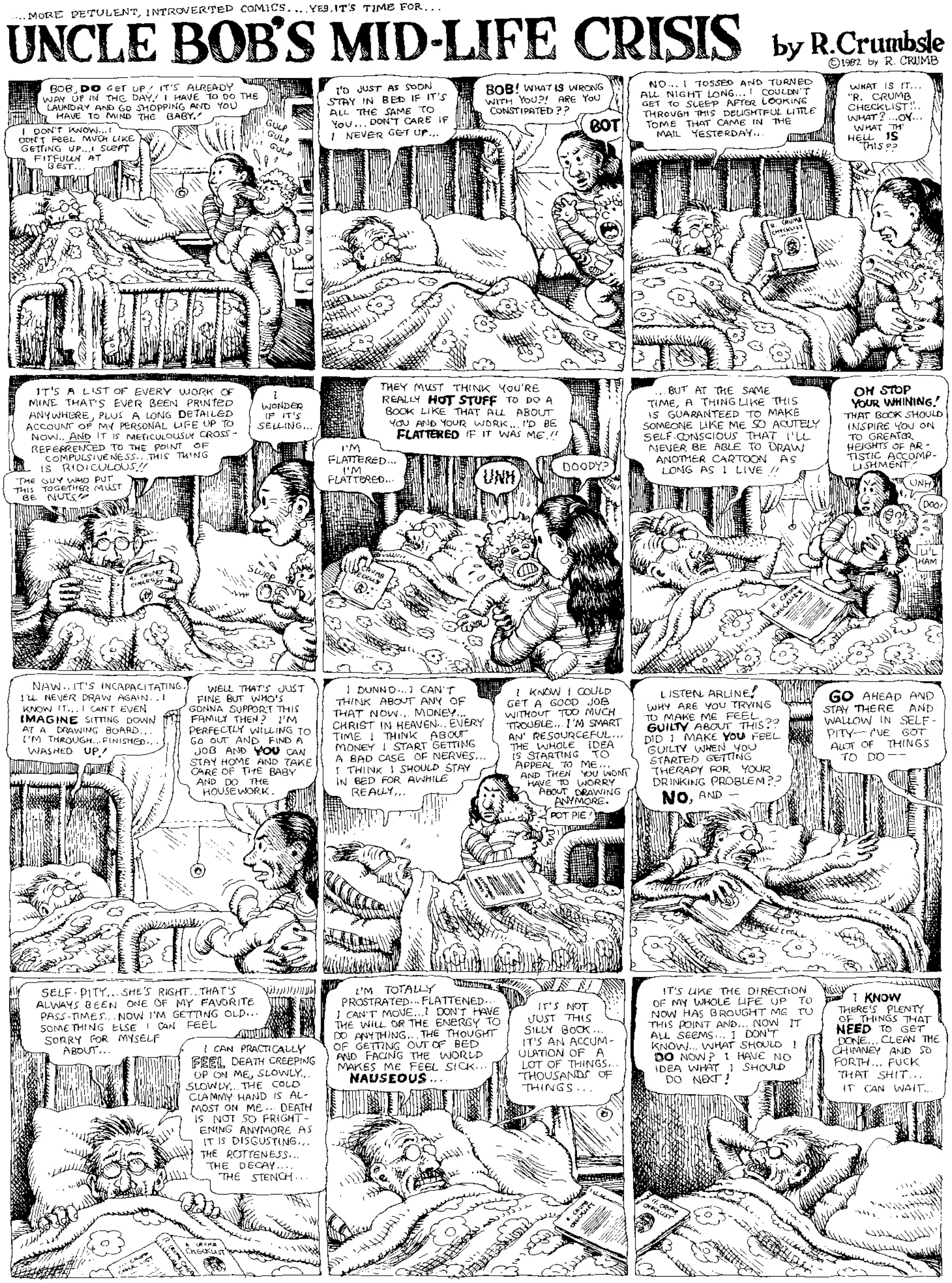
Robert's vision of culture was, and is, consistent. It's rooted in the music and art that he nourished and that he, in turn, helped historicize. His critique of the larger culture is essentially class based: the cake-eaters, as he calls them, suppress the roiling consciousness of America in favor of more bourgeois forms that cloak the messiness in a blanket of bland respectability. When incisive, soulful work did manage to cut through, like Kurtzman's *Mad* or Barks's ducks, it was either at great personal cost or rendered anonymous. He was always in search of an expression he deemed authentic—emerging more or less organically in any given culture, and often scorned by the upper and middle classes.

Filling pages for *Weirdo* and supporting the family meant he got out to the red toolshed-cum-studio three or four times a week, a tin ceiling over his head and a kerosene stove for heat. His setup was much the same as ever: a drafting table for drawing, a desk for supplies and sundry papers, and cubbies above for mail, documents, and other business. Surrounding him, then as now: a wall or two of carefully filed 78s; various cartoon toys of ceramic, pewter, and tin; miniature cars and trains; model storefronts; and a framed lobby card of skyscrapers falling down, with the ominous title "End of the World." It was a place away from the main house, a modest bungalow that Aline kitted out rather like an idealized version of the Wild Family's home, complete with a 1930s refrigerator and a 1929 electric stove. The windows were always ringed by curtains; the side tables were draped in old linen, and there was never a shortage of doilies.

In that studio he produced a story that perfectly captured the emotional and physical tenor of his early 1980s: the eight-page "Uncle Bob's Mid-Life Crisis," published in *Weirdo* 7. Drawn in the loose cartooning style he'd developed in *American Splendor*, it moves as he moves, trudging in the morning, frantic in sex play, and dreamy in contemplation. The dialogue-heavy, action-light strip was inspired in part by Robert's admiration for the witheringly funny

1920s–40s comic strip *The Bungle Family* by Harry Tuthill, in which the put-upon, lower-middle-class George Bungle lies in bed grumbling or paces about scowling. Robert used a Rapidograph and deliberately kept his forms loose, which allows readers into his visual world. The story unfolds in a twelve-panel grid, in which he kept the backgrounds to a minimum in order to focus on body language and dialogue. The first page and a half is simply Robert under the covers bemoaning his fate. Aline comes to wake him up—it's his turn to care for the baby, she has to get groceries, and he's paralyzed with dread from having read the just-published *R. Crumb Checklist*. We are reading a comic by a man who feels he's made too many comics. Robert's ability to turn an ostensibly visually dull subject into an absorbing and quietly virtuosic sequence is precisely the skill that he refined over the next couple of decades.

The comic follows his own routine. Once he's up and Sophie is fed, Aline drives him to town, and he sits on a bench and watches the world go by, crouched, hunched, stretched out, until he calls a young woman with whom he's been having a casual flirtation. He spends the next morning bemoaning his life as Aline mops, vacuums, and does the laundry. Finally, after six panels signaling a few hours of time, Aline tells him to go to the studio shed and do some work. He sits outside his workspace for another fifteen panels, daydreaming about records, seventeenth-century Dutch farmers, and testing female flexibility. Then he's in the studio, trying to fix an old lamp, when a friend drops by; they chat about life for a page, and then it's evening and we're back in bed with Robert and Aline. She chuckles listening to a sex-therapist talk show while he bemoans his creative paralysis, decides to take commercial art jobs to make some money, and then finally resolves to do some work the next day.


...MORE PETULENT, INTROVERTED COMICS....YES, IT'S TIME FOR...
UNCLE BOB'S MID-LIFE CRISIS
by R.Crumbsle
©1982 by R. CRUMB
BOB, DO GET UP! IT'S ALREADY WAY UP IN THE DAY! I HAVE TO DO THE LAUNDRY AND GO SHOPPING AND YOU HAVE TO MIND THE BABY!
I DON'T KNOW...I DON'T FEEL MUCH LIKE GETTING UP...I SLEPT FITFULLY AT BEST...
GULP GULP GULP
I'D JUST AS SOON STAY IN BED IF IT'S ALL THE SAME TO YOU... DON'T CARE IF I NEVER GET UP...
BOB! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?! ARE YOU CONSTIPATED??
BOT
NO... I TOSSED AND TURNED ALL NIGHT LONG... I COULDN'T GET TO SLEEP AFTER LOOKING THROUGH THIS DELIGHTFUL LITTLE TOME THAT CAME IN THE MAIL YESTERDAY...
WHAT IS IT... "R. CRUMB CHECKLIST"!.. WHAT?...OY... WHAT TH' HELL IS THIS??
R. CRUMB CHECKLIST
IT'S A LIST OF EVERY WORK OF MINE THAT'S EVER BEEN PRINTED ANYWHERE, PLUS A LONG DETAILED ACCOUNT OF MY PERSONAL LIFE UP TO NOW.. AND IT IS METICULOUSLY CROSS-REFERRENCED TO THE POINT OF COMPULSIVENESS.. THIS THING IS RIDICULOUS!!
THE GUY WHO PUT THIS TOGETHER MUST BE NUTS!!
I WONDER IF IT'S SELLING...
SURP
THEY MUST THINK YOU'RE REALLY HOT STUFF TO DO A BOOK LIKE THAT ALL ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WORK... I'D BE FLATTERED IF IT WAS ME!!
I'M FLATTERED... I'M FLATTERED...
UNH
DOODY?
...BUT AT THE SAME TIME, A THING LIKE THIS IS GUARANTEED TO MAKE SOMEONE LIKE ME SO ACUTELY SELF-CONSCIOUS THAT I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO DRAW ANOTHER CARTOON AS LONG AS I LIVE!!
OH STOP YOUR WHINING! THAT BOOK SHOULD INSPIRE YOU ON TO GREATER HEIGHTS OF ARTISTIC ACCOMPLISHMENT!
UNH
DOO!
LI'L HAM
NAW...IT'S INCAPACITATING. I'LL NEVER DRAW AGAIN...I KNOW IT... I CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE SITTING DOWN AT A DRAWING BOARD... I'M THROUGH...FINISHED... WASHED UP!
WELL THAT'S JUST FINE BUT WHO'S GONNA SUPPORT THIS FAMILY THEN? I'M PERFECTLY WILLING TO GO OUT AND FIND A JOB AND YOU CAN STAY HOME AND TAKE CARE OF THE BABY AND DO THE HOUSEWORK.
I DUNNO...I CAN'T THINK ABOUT ANY OF THAT NOW... MONEY... CHRIST IN HEAVEN... EVERY TIME I THINK ABOUT MONEY I START GETTING A BAD CASE OF NERVES... I THINK I SHOULD STAY IN BED FOR AWHILE REALLY...
I KNOW I COULD GET A GOOD JOB WITHOUT TOO MUCH TROUBLE... I'M SMART AN' RESOURCEFUL... THE WHOLE IDEA IS STARTING TO APPEAL TO ME... AND THEN YOU WONT HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT DRAWING ANYMORE.
POT PIE!
LISTEN ARLINE! WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL GUILTY ABOUT THIS?? DID I MAKE YOU FEEL GUILTY WHEN YOU STARTED GETTING THERAPY FOR YOUR DRINKING PROBLEM?? NO, AND —
GO AHEAD AND STAY THERE AND WALLOW IN SELF-PITY— I'VE GOT ALOT OF THINGS TO DO —
SELF-PITY... SHE'S RIGHT... THAT'S ALWAYS BEEN ONE OF MY FAVORITE PASS-TIMES... NOW I'M GETTING OLD... SOMETHING ELSE I CAN FEEL SORRY FOR MYSELF ABOUT...
I CAN PRACTICALLY FEEL DEATH CREEPING UP ON ME, SLOWLY... SLOWLY... THE COLD CLAMMY HAND IS ALMOST ON ME... DEATH IS NOT SO FRIGHTENING ANYMORE AS IT IS DISGUSTING... THE ROTTENESS... THE DECAY.... THE STENCH...
R. CRUMB CHECKLIST
I'M TOTALLY PROSTRATED... FLATTENED... I CAN'T MOVE...I DON'T HAVE THE WILL OR THE ENERGY TO DO ANYTHING... THE THOUGHT OF GETTING OUT OF BED AND FACING THE WORLD MAKES ME FEEL SICK... NAUSEOUS....
IT'S NOT JUST THIS SILLY BOOK... IT'S AN ACCUMULATION OF A LOT OF THINGS... THOUSANDS OF THINGS...
IT'S LIKE THE DIRECTION OF MY WHOLE LIFE UP TO NOW HAS BROUGHT ME TO THIS POINT AND... NOW IT ALL SEEMS... I DON'T KNOW... WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW? I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I SHOULD DO NEXT!
I KNOW THERE'S PLENTY OF THINGS THAT NEED TO GET DONE... CLEAN THE CHIMNEY AND SO FORTH... FUCK THAT SHIT... IT CAN WAIT...

"Uncle Bob's Mid-Life Crisis," *Weirdo* no. 7, Winter 1983.

The final panel is Robert showing Aline the first page of the strip we're reading. Having ruminated throughout the story, he's drawn his own life. The ending lands as an intentionally satirical snapshot of his existence in the early 1980s, though most readers took it seriously. The reactions were either "get it together man" or "I'm right there with you." Robert was making formal and thematic strides, and once again playing with his own persona, though now with more introspection than manic vitriol. Robert's work in this vein, along with *Twisted Sisters, Power Pak*, and *American Splendor*, had a profound impact on independent comics. The cartoonist Seth, whose *Palookaville* series has chronicled the everyday existence of objects and people in a hazy past, found this turn of Robert's revelatory: "Crumb spoke directly and with a powerful vernacular naturalism. This was immensely inspirational to me. I recall reading the early stuff he did with Pekar and it hit me like a hammer. You could just talk about your own life—the comics could be a conduit for personal experience. It took time for this to go from inspiration to understanding (I may still be working on that) but Crumb gave me something to aim for (Lynda Barry too). Ways to talk about life using the comics medium. Ways to make art that did not seem obscurist or pretentious. I could understand what Crumb was doing. He was a pointer. An instructor. Real art, I felt he was saying, comes from real life." In Robert's work, there is no longer a cartoon character in sight. Except for Mr. Natural, who would reappear later in the decade, he was working without his old icons, none of whom appeared in a story again. The haze of the sixties had finally passed; his legacy began to shift from door-busting visionary to contemplative chronicler of the everyday.

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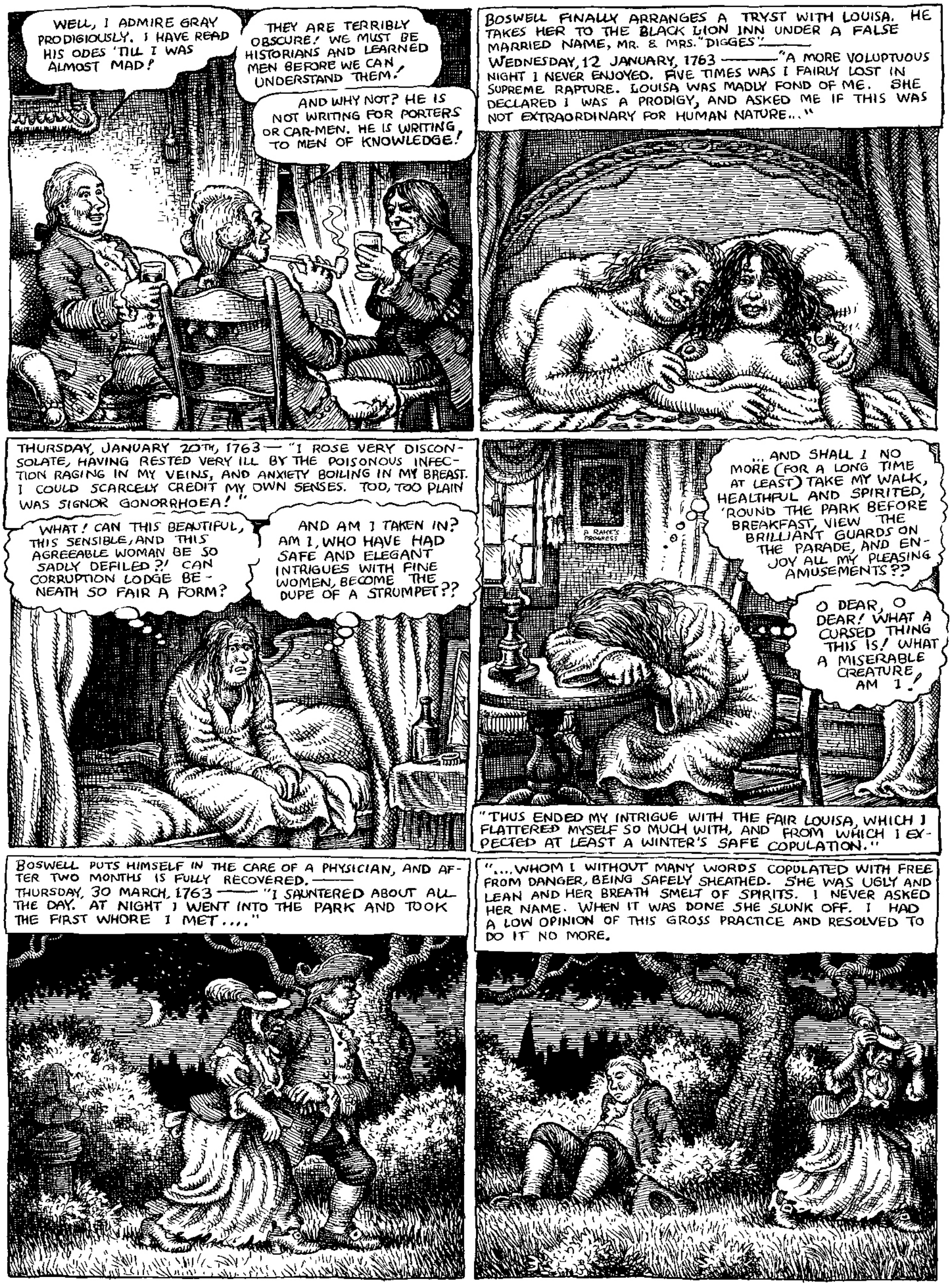
CHAPTER 19

Duality in the Suburbs

Having found a way forward in comics, Robert began exploring the complexity of his life as a community member and husband and libido-bound sex maniac, a working cartoonist and a far-out existential searcher, through the lives of others. He began with "A Klassic Comic: Excerpts from Boswell's *London Journal* 1762–1763," a five-page adaptation published in *Weirdo* 3. He could relate to Boswell's grimy and lusty adventures—he was a seeker and a fool. Robert returned to the eighteenth-century artist William Hogarth to envision Boswell's London, and drew the strip with densely crosshatched passages that emphasized the grotty streets and seedy seductions. In the 1980s, Robert would usually sketch out an opening story page and then lay out the following pages in pencil, staying about a page and a half ahead of himself as he drew the story in ink. The drawing is fulsome and the storytelling concise: Boswell's failed seduction of one "Louisa" is signaled by her hat floating just off her head as she recoils from his embrace in a dim room. Robert follows the future biographer through the salons and brothels of London, highlighting the duality of decadence and respectability, a duality within Robert himself. "He would confess all those secret sins to his diary," Robert said of Boswell, "and then be very remorseful and try to behave like the fine gentleman he pictured himself as."

Boswell's split existence and libidinous exploits were close to home for Robert. From the late 1970s through the late 1980s he was involved with two girlfriends and assorted one-night stands in Davis and San Francisco. He would take the bus down to the city sometimes, carrying his old army-green metal suitcase and his mandolin, sometimes a bagged lunch Aline would prepare. He went to absurd lengths in his quest for erotic adventures. He drew an account of his raging libido in the 1988 story "Memories Are Made of This!" in which we meet Robert, wearing an overcoat and hat in rainy San Francisco, catching a bus to go see "Karen," "all for that ass! That stupendous rump!," praying, "Oh lord, I hope she's game." This was actually Jane, one of a pair of friends, along with Susan, with whom Robert would fool around in the city. They were part of the art and poetry scene of the 1970s, and also friendly with Aline, who used to tease Robert with Susan and Jane, remembering once, "We all went to North Beach, me, R, S and J, had a real nice day. R. was in ecstasy out on the town with 3 big ones. He tried to stuff us all into a phone booth in front of Mama's, but it almost went over. But he humped and rubbed against us & a great time was had by all."


WELL, I ADMIRE GRAY PRODIGIOUSLY. I HAVE READ HIS ODES 'TILL I WAS ALMOST MAD!
THEY ARE TERRIBLY OBSCURE! WE MUST BE HISTORIANS AND LEARNED MEN BEFORE WE CAN UNDERSTAND THEM!
AND WHY NOT? HE IS NOT WRITING FOR PORTERS OR CAR-MEN. HE IS WRITING TO MEN OF KNOWLEDGE!
BOSWELL FINALLY ARRANGES A TRYST WITH LOUISA. HE TAKES HER TO THE BLACK LION INN UNDER A FALSE MARRIED NAME, MR. & MRS. "DIGGES".——— WEDNESDAY, 12 JANUARY, 1763 ———"A MORE VOLUPTUOUS NIGHT I NEVER ENJOYED. FIVE TIMES WAS I FAIRLY LOST IN SUPREME RAPTURE. LOUISA WAS MADLY FOND OF ME. SHE DECLARED I WAS A PRODIGY, AND ASKED ME IF THIS WAS NOT EXTRAORDINARY FOR HUMAN NATURE..."
THURSDAY, JANUARY 20TH, 1763 — "I ROSE VERY DISCONSOLATE, HAVING RESTED VERY ILL BY THE POISONOUS INFECTION RAGING IN MY VEINS, AND ANXIETY BOILING IN MY BREAST. I COULD SCARCELY CREDIT MY OWN SENSES. TOO, TOO PLAIN WAS SIGNOR GONORRHOEA!"
WHAT! CAN THIS BEAUTIFUL, THIS SENSIBLE, AND THIS AGREEABLE WOMAN BE SO SADLY DEFILED?! CAN CORRUPTION LODGE BENEATH SO FAIR A FORM?
AND AM I TAKEN IN? AM I, WHO HAVE HAD SAFE AND ELEGANT INTRIGUES WITH FINE WOMEN, BECOME THE DUPE OF A STRUMPET??
A RAKE'S PROGRESS
... AND SHALL I NO MORE (FOR A LONG TIME AT LEAST) TAKE MY WALK, HEALTHFUL AND SPIRITED, 'ROUND THE PARK BEFORE BREAKFAST, VIEW THE BRILLIANT GUARDS ON THE PARADE, AND ENJOY ALL MY PLEASING AMUSEMENTS??
O DEAR, O DEAR! WHAT A CURSED THING THIS IS! WHAT A MISERABLE CREATURE AM I!
"THUS ENDED MY INTRIGUE WITH THE FAIR LOUISA, WHICH I FLATTERED MYSELF SO MUCH WITH, AND FROM WHICH I EXPECTED AT LEAST A WINTER'S SAFE COPULATION."
BOSWELL PUTS HIMSELF IN THE CARE OF A PHYSICIAN, AND AFTER TWO MONTHS IS FULLY RECOVERED.——— THURSDAY, 30 MARCH, 1763 ——— "I SAUNTERED ABOUT ALL THE DAY. AT NIGHT I WENT INTO THE PARK AND TOOK THE FIRST WHORE I MET...."
"....WHOM I WITHOUT MANY WORDS COPULATED WITH FREE FROM DANGER, BEING SAFELY SHEATHED. SHE WAS UGLY AND LEAN AND HER BREATH SMELT OF SPIRITS. I NEVER ASKED HER NAME. WHEN IT WAS DONE SHE SLUNK OFF. I HAD A LOW OPINION OF THIS GROSS PRACTICE AND RESOLVED TO DO IT NO MORE.

“Excerpts from Boswell’s London Journal, 1762–1763,” *Weirdo* no. 3, Fall 1981.

“Memories Are Made of This!” builds for two pages tracking Robert as he takes a bus across a rainy city at night and laments Karen’s lack of intelligence and fantasizes about her body, finally getting to her home by the end of the second page. As they get to talking, she says, “I think you’re a very gifted artist but sort of a sad fellow…” She keeps drinking, until, in the story, she’s pliable enough for Robert to finally make his advance. He shows her drunk and out of control while he, the creepy sex fiend, has his way with her. Jane/Karen herself, however, remembers being in full control. She remembers Robert as “physically beautiful, with smooth skin and a bit of peach fuzz. It was an erotic and intellectual exchange. I played the pliable crazy Catholic girl to his deranged sex maniac.” It took a long time for Robert to realize that women might have some agency in his fetishes—that they were there for it as much as he was. He was more likely to view women as all sexually “normal” and himself as a creep, thereby satisfying his own self-loathing and need for domination. He was so committed to conveying his vision of the human condition, so insistent on indicting both his own and the larger male urge to dominate, that he was willing to plausibly portray himself as a quasi-rapist. It’s the artistic equivalent of walking around that cinder block wall to take the teeth-destroying hit just to prove the dangerous foolishness of mankind. He was tempting fate. But he is, as ever, doing this without ever breaking the social contract between himself as entertainer and his audience as the entertained. No matter the content of the story, the rhythm, drawing, and tone is as smooth as his hero Carl Barks and as elastic as Harvey Kurtzman’s humor. This isn’t Andy Kaufman trying to turn an audience against him by playing the heel. Robert wanted to subvert in the language of mass communication. Moreover, Robert got off on drawing his abjection and domination. It’s evident in the wistful title of the story itself. You want to know the truth about the male libido? he asks. Here it is in all its ugliness.

Robert had two steady girlfriends in those years, Carol Engberg and Mary Boettcher, both possessed of Robert's ideal body—a form once dismissed as "chubby" or "athletic" rather than beautiful. There was a certain formality to introducing a steady relationship into Robert and Aline's marriage. Carol remembered, "Aline and Robert explained outside on the porch of the house in Winters that sex was not exclusively between just them. They were totally cut from the same bolt. They were open, married, wanted to be able to express feelings and desires freely. He wanted to explore and experience what turned you on, explored creatively, like expressing yourself." Mary, who had been friends with Aline, remembered an "intense sexual relationship, which was great," saying, "He was good to me, interested in me as a person. He helped me feel a lot more confident about myself, and encouraged me artistically." Robert had specific outfits, and especially shoes, he asked both women to wear, poses he needed them to assume. Mary said, "I was open and nonjudgmental in my sexual relationships, and he was directive and clear about what he wanted—I liked that—I wanted clarity." Robert was "one hundred percent who he was, there was no deception." For Mary, he seemed "normal" in his straightforwardness. For both women, it was the first time in their lives that a man loved what they'd been told was unacceptable: their bodies.

Robert liked his "big girls," and with Aline deep in her own work, motherhood, and fitness, her body changed as well. They remained lovers, but as they aged she became increasingly slim. His particular kink would have to find another subject. This changed the dynamic between them, and certainly hurt her feelings, though she was loath to admit it. Robert's sexual world became a place apart for him. He didn't need to be "R. Crumb" but could instead find an outlet for his inner self, his sense of himself as a grotesque ectomorph.

Robert met his occasional lover, friend, and Taschen book editor Dian Hanson at an opening at the Gotham Book Mart in New York in 1987. Hanson, at the time a bodybuilder, and an editor in the porn industry since the 1970s, arrived dressed in a plaid skirt and leather bustier. When she told him she'd learned to masturbate from his comics, Robert, à la Buster Keaton, did a pratfall. After dinner at the Russian Tea Room, Hanson gave him a piggyback ride down Sixth Avenue. Hanson summarized Robert's kinks from the 1980s forward: "Robert is day to day submissive but sexually dominant, with the knowledge he can't hurt the woman. His taste is for a large, long body, with a pyramidal head, which accurately reproduces the point of view from childhood, looking up from the floor to Mommy. And they can protect him from the world. And they in turn desire to dominate. After orgasming, Robert needed to be held and cuddled, and would ask 'are you OK?' Dominating weaker women is not possible for him. He would feel too guilty. He wants the strong powerful women who will be there taking care of him. He wants to test her strength, and cum, yes, but most important is the testing of thighs, tongue, buttocks. And he is also emotionally supportive to everyone he cares about. He's so brilliant and caring, I never had anyone to talk to, but Robert is that for me."

Talking, as Robert did with Aline, was a tremendous part of these friendships and relationships: as he does with anyone of intense interest to him, Robert made women feel like they were the center of the world. He listens intently and without judgment to anyone he feels is speaking from the heart. Whether it's a friend who claims to have been abducted by UFOS multiple times, friends with theories about government conspiracies, friends with stories of records—he is open. And sex, for him, was an endless exploration ever deeper in its subtleties. He could explore himself and others in a way unavailable to him in any other form.

Life in Winters, if not exactly easy all the time, was balanced. Their neighbors were a mix of unassuming musicians and writers, bikers, and right-wingers. In the former category was Robert's Rural Sophisticates bandmate Keith Cary, who lived in a house up the facing hill. Cary remembers the Crumbs as unassuming, helpful neighbors. They looked after each other's places if one couple was out of town and were available to help out with the occasional fixes that rural life prompted. Keith and Robert played music together, and with another friend read and discussed *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History* page by page. The Crumbs also grew close to Julie and Craig McNamara, the daughter-in-law and son of former secretary of defense Robert McNamara. They had children the same age and celebrated holidays together, and Robert drew birth announcements and Christmas cards for the family. Craig was, like others Robert met, a UC Davis student who stayed in the area to make a life in organic farming. They shared an interest in agriculture and national politics as well as a profound concern for the brutality on which America was built. They were also the sons of men who, from an executive suite and on the hills of Saipan, committed unimaginable acts of violence.

On April 24, 1982, Chuck Crumb died after a lengthy undiagnosed illness. He was sixty-eight years old, though he looked a decade older; he had just retired the year before, closing his management consulting firm CVC Associates Inc. because of persistent exhaustion. His body was failing him. Robert flew to see him in the veterans hospital in Philadelphia: "The last time I saw him alive he had this tube going down his throat, these mittens over his hands so he couldn't pull the tube out, and he couldn't talk. He really wanted to talk to me. He begged me and the nurse, his mittened hands in a gesture of prayer, to take out the tube, so he could tell me something. She wouldn't do it." He died three days later.

Carol, Sandra, Robert, and Bea flew to Chuck's funeral in New Richland, Minnesota. He would be interred in the local cemetery next to his own people. Carol, now divorced, was living near her alma mater Washington College in Chestertown, Maryland. She made a life for herself working part-time at a library and part-time at a wildlife center. Carol wasn't critical like the other kids, nor did she have the rich inner life that sustained and maddened them. Though she drank and smoked too much, she loved her cats and lived simply. After Chuck's funeral Robert flew back with Sandra to her home in Bellingham, Washington. They hadn't seen each other since their skirmish in San Francisco nine years earlier. Becoming close again wasn't in their natures, but they got along with one another. She moved to Washington in the late 1970s and lived there with her longtime partner, Kim. Sandra ran a women's bookstore and worked for a library program supplying books to hospices. In the early 1980s, she sent the now-adolescent Avery to live with Marty, perhaps thinking that a male household would be more suitable for a growing boy. Marty was then scraping by working for a long-running breast-focused porn magazine called *Fling*. He lived in a cramped apartment, shelves groaning with books and records, in San Francisco's Richmond District. Gradually Sandra's relationship with her son became as distant as her relationships with the rest of the family.

Maxon didn't attend the funeral. The slights he felt his family had perpetrated had annihilated any chance of reconciliation. In the late 1970s he decided to beg for money on the streets of the Chinatown and downtown San Francisco, which he felt offset the karmic load of the aid checks he received. He would sit in the lotus position on a cushion on the sidewalk, with a bowl in front of him. Following a path unique to his own journey, he continued to allow his epilepsy to go untreated because he felt the petit mal seizures brought him release. Every six weeks since the late 1970s he has passed a twenty-nine-foot strip of cotton through his gastrointestinal system, in the mouth and out the anus, a cleansing that takes about a week to complete. In 1980, he took a damp and moldy room with a small bathroom and kitchenette at the Winsor Hotel, a welfare residence in the middle of the Tenderloin District. After a fifteen-year break, Maxon began assaulting women again in the early 1980s. He was caught three times in the span of a year—goosing a woman in Macy's, lifting another's skirt. Before a judge, faced with jail or the psychiatric ward at San Francisco General Hospital, he chose the latter, and was remanded there in 1984 for two weeks, followed by mandatory therapy. When Robert spoke to him, Maxon would giggle and repeat the phrase "old, odd, infinitely negative."

He chose a stringent ascetic life because, he said, "it quiets the mind." During the day, Maxon alternately silently meditated with a simple wooden bowl for spare change and scoured the streets for discarded electronics to fix up and resell. He slept on a mat on the floor, eating only raw vegetables, some seeds, and a little grain. Maxon nursed the wounds of his childhood—he had been the lowest in the pecking order of the three brothers. Robert considers picking on the "little Polack," as they used to call him, "the worst cruelty [he] committed in [his] life." In a letter to Charles, Robert explained their brother: "In his own mind he has an elaborate system of justifications for his present mode of existence… All going back, of course, to childhood, mother, you, all that… And, of course, modest as he may appear on the surface, he truly does believe that he is the first genuine Hindu-style 'holy man' to be born in the western world. He may be suffering from what is known in psychology as a 'delusional system.' I don't know, I can't figure out who's crazier… You or him…" Robert was nothing if not loyal, still willing to patiently listen to Maxon's hermetic vision of the world and try to help him. He published twenty-one drawings by Maxon in *Weirdo* 3, which gave him a bit of recognition and led to decades of sales of paintings and drawings, facilitated for a while by Terry Zwigoff.

By the late 1970s Charles Crumb was resigned to his fate. He was living at home with his parents, taking his medications, reading, and writing letters to Robert: “Poor Beattie and I have scared off a lot of people. It’s all due to my psychosis; people get queasy in the company of a psychotic: they want to run away and never come back again, but because I am essentially detached, this doesn’t bother me; if a person in that situation were not essentially detached he might get angry enough to kill somebody, but because (with the help of the medication) I’m essentially detached this doesn’t bother me, also there’s another factor involved as well, I can’t be with people. I can’t be bothered with people. Because there are so many interesting and beautiful books in the world that have yet to be read, relations with other people would simply interfere with this; I mean would interfere with my reading, so what possible difference can it make to me whether a man comes or goes.”

Over the years Charles sent Robert dozens of pages of edge-to-edge block-lettered correspondence, sometimes just ending a letter in midsentence at the bottom right corner of the paper, not bothering to continue on another sheet. He wrote about his medications, his depression, his memories, the household, and examinations of their childhood, Sandra, and Maxon. Each letter is fluidly lyrical, with the propulsive energy of a stream-of-consciousness monologist. He would write rough drafts of his letters, then redraft them. The words went like arrows straight to Robert’s psyche—these were reports from a fate he’d escaped. In 1978, Charles essentially resigned from life itself, writing to Robert:

> A list of things I did in the past that I’ll probably never do again: I’ll never join a theatre guild again; I’ll never act in a play again. I’ll never do my Long John Silver imitation again; I’ll never do my imitation of Bobby Driscoll as Jim Hawkins again. I’ll

> never do my *Treasure Island* act again. I'll never buy records again, you remember all those long-playing records I bought when we were living in Milford and Dover? Well, I'll never do that again. I'll never crack Jim and Mabel jokes again. I'll never crack Jim and Elizabeth jokes again. I'll never tell Sandy gang jokes again. I'll never draw cartoons again; I'll never make a homemade comic book again, will never do a two-man again. I'll never collect comic books again. Never collect *Treasure Island* stills again. I'll never pay atrocious prices for essentially cheap articles again (such as comic books and *Treasure Island* stills).
>
> Will never, for that matter, go on any collecting manias again; but I have a lot of books and you may say I collect them, but this is not altogether true, as soon as I finish reading a book I usually throw it out and only rarely do I ever reread. I'll never go to a movie again (for one thing I can't afford it). I'll never dance again. I'll never wallow in self pity again, never indulge in an orgy of righteous indignation again. I'll never argue about religion again. I'll never attempt to argue with anybody about anything again.

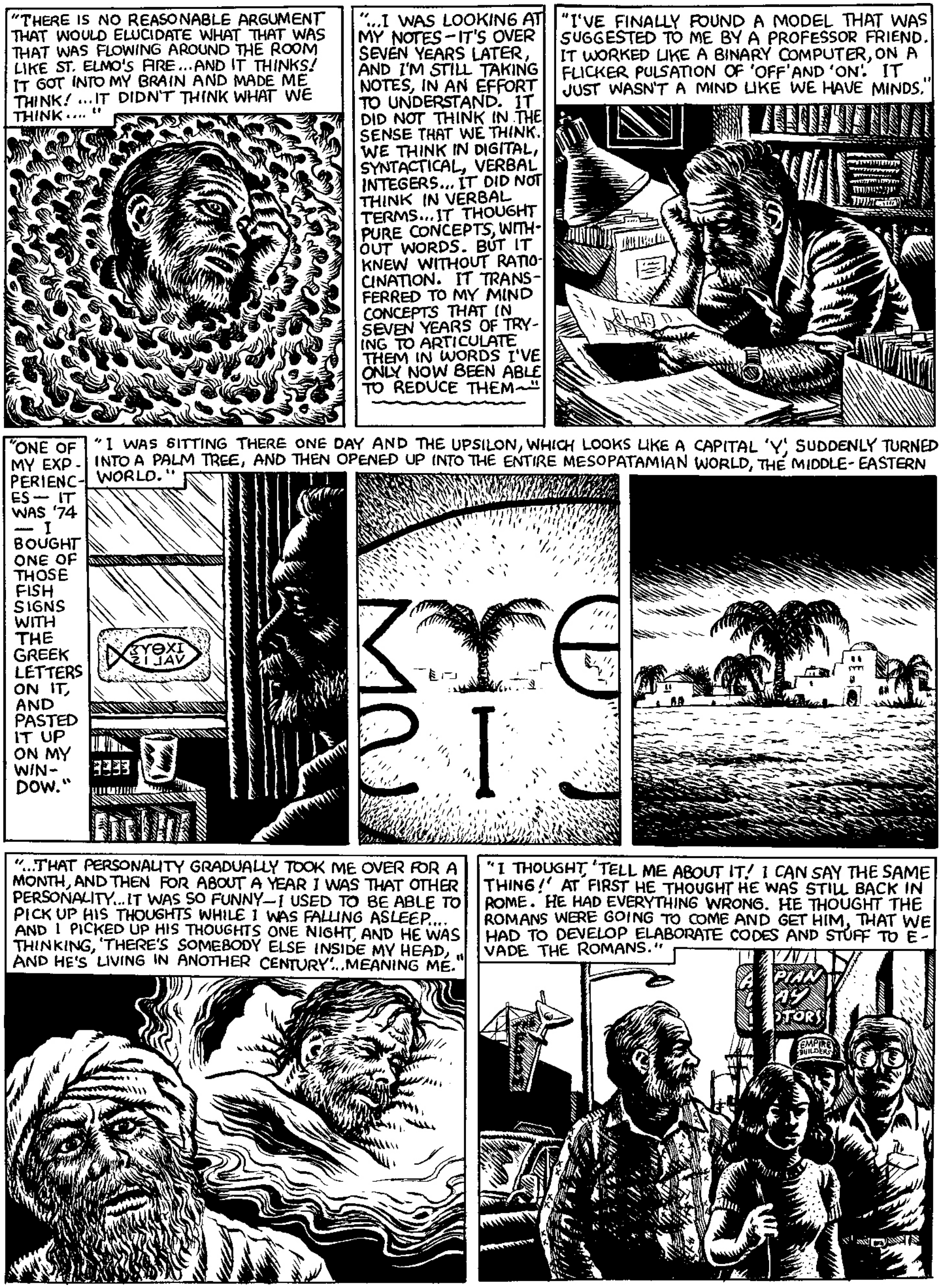
Charles's and the Crumb family's past is forever present in those letters. He summons it like Robert does his memories of sexual encounters or record finds. Robert remained fascinated and impressed by his brother, and, by extension, all the mad ones, all the people locked inside their own consciousnesses—people like B. N. Duncan or the innumerable seekers whose minds were whirling with a unique energy and yet isolated, rarely finding an audience.

* * *

In 1983, after nine issues of *Weirdo* in just two years (*Zap* by contrast was at its eleventh issue) that were baffling to some and a clarion call from outsider voices to others, Robert, fed up with the negative feedback, the increasing numbers of submissions and artists to track, and the logistics involved in the day-to-day production, offered the editorial reins to contributor Peter Bagge, then only in his midtwenties. Robert encouraged Bagge's cartooning, liked his edge and unpretentious tone. When Bagge mentioned starting his own anthology, Robert simply offered him *Weirdo*. Bagge was in New York, and Robert in California—they'd never even met—but he was enthusiastic about the magazine and undaunted by the amount of work involved. Robert gave Bagge free rein with the magazine and continued drawing the covers.

Back in Winters, Robert used his comics to peer into the culture through stories of mysticism, duplicity, madness, and artistry, mostly in days and lives past. Robert slowed down here, adopting a more deliberate meter and the bemused detachment of a fellow traveler watching the habits of a particularly fascinating species. He'd been skimming Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing's book *Psychopathia Sexualis* since at least 1977, as intrigued by the language and the details as he was interested in finding a context for his own sexual compulsions. Robert's ten-page comic published in *Weirdo* number 13 pointedly shows how cruelly the medical world of the time (and, he argues, still) treated patients with "abnormal" compulsions. What might become of his brothers in that world? Of himself? This story, like "Boswell," explores the world through its seekers, customs, and taboos. Robert, an outsider all his life, drew his way into understanding both the structure and its variegated pathways. He found another seeker in Philip K. Dick, who experienced a vision of himself alive in the Roman Empire, an abridged account of which was published as *Philip K. Dick: The Last Testament*. Robert used that text and the few photos then available of Dick to work out the eight-page "The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick." He carefully composed the panels in pencil in order to find the right balance between images and the verbose text, and inked with a sable-hair brush. Rendering the sequence in lush swooping strokes inspired by the thickly inked, dark-shadowed comics of 1950s horror, crime, and sci-fi artist Jay Disbrow and EC artist Wally Wood —both of whom created dramatic tension through chiaroscuro effects—Robert hews closely to the man himself: encircled by St. Elmo's fire, mind ablaze with revelation; a shrouded visage on the verge of possession by the prophet Elijah. Dick's state of suspended hyperreality, between madness and time travel, is palpable through the crook of his neck, the arch of his brow, the encroaching darkness, and the swirling light. He's uncannily alive on the page.

For the cartoonist and journalist Joe Sacco, seeing Robert's work at this time, and his "attention to costume, architecture, and the taste of a time and place," was "very influential on [his] own work." He recalled, "You could feel the humidity of the South or the sticky floors of a London bawdy house in his drawings. He helped me think of comics panels as atmospheres for a reader to inhabit." Using a brush, with which he'd begun experimenting around 1982, enabled Robert to go a bit faster and to get out ahead of his crosshatching compulsion. Instead of all those lines, he could fill in the blacks with a few strokes. That he changed tools at all is highly unusual. Cartoonists are creatures of habit—most stick with a single tool for their careers, and most, by age forty, are settled into a working method that suits what they need to do. Drawing with a brush changed Robert's thinking and decision-making time, facilitating a new approach to light and dark, a whole different mood. Robert's brushwork tends to telegraph the interior lives of his subjects through deep pools of black ink—a window might be just white lines in a sea of darkness—and elegant strokes that move as, or against, a character's movements.


"THERE IS NO REASONABLE ARGUMENT THAT WOULD ELUCIDATE WHAT THAT WAS THAT WAS FLOWING AROUND THE ROOM LIKE ST. ELMO'S FIRE...AND IT THINKS! IT GOT INTO MY BRAIN AND MADE ME THINK! ...IT DIDN'T THINK WHAT WE THINK...."
"...I WAS LOOKING AT MY NOTES—IT'S OVER SEVEN YEARS LATER, AND I'M STILL TAKING NOTES, IN AN EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND. IT DID NOT THINK IN THE SENSE THAT WE THINK. WE THINK IN DIGITAL, SYNTACTICAL, VERBAL INTEGERS... IT DID NOT THINK IN VERBAL TERMS...IT THOUGHT PURE CONCEPTS, WITHOUT WORDS. BUT IT KNEW WITHOUT RATIOCINATION. IT TRANSFERRED TO MY MIND CONCEPTS THAT IN SEVEN YEARS OF TRYING TO ARTICULATE THEM IN WORDS I'VE ONLY NOW BEEN ABLE TO REDUCE THEM—"
"I'VE FINALLY FOUND A MODEL THAT WAS SUGGESTED TO ME BY A PROFESSOR FRIEND. IT WORKED LIKE A BINARY COMPUTER, ON A FLICKER PULSATION OF 'OFF' AND 'ON'. IT JUST WASN'T A MIND LIKE WE HAVE MINDS."
"ONE OF MY EXPERIENCES— IT WAS '74 — I BOUGHT ONE OF THOSE FISH SIGNS WITH THE GREEK LETTERS ON IT, AND PASTED IT UP ON MY WINDOW."
"I WAS SITTING THERE ONE DAY AND THE UPSILON, WHICH LOOKS LIKE A CAPITAL 'Y', SUDDENLY TURNED INTO A PALM TREE, AND THEN OPENED UP INTO THE ENTIRE MESOPATAMIAN WORLD, THE MIDDLE-EASTERN WORLD."
"...THAT PERSONALITY GRADUALLY TOOK ME OVER FOR A MONTH, AND THEN FOR ABOUT A YEAR I WAS THAT OTHER PERSONALITY...IT WAS SO FUNNY—I USED TO BE ABLE TO PICK UP HIS THOUGHTS WHILE I WAS FALLING ASLEEP.... AND I PICKED UP HIS THOUGHTS ONE NIGHT, AND HE WAS THINKING, 'THERE'S SOMEBODY ELSE INSIDE MY HEAD, AND HE'S LIVING IN ANOTHER CENTURY'...MEANING ME."
"I THOUGHT, 'TELL ME ABOUT IT! I CAN SAY THE SAME THING!' AT FIRST HE THOUGHT HE WAS STILL BACK IN ROME. HE HAD EVERYTHING WRONG. HE THOUGHT THE ROMANS WERE GOING TO COME AND GET HIM, THAT WE HAD TO DEVELOP ELABORATE CODES AND STUFF TO EVADE THE ROMANS."
EMPIRE BUILDERS

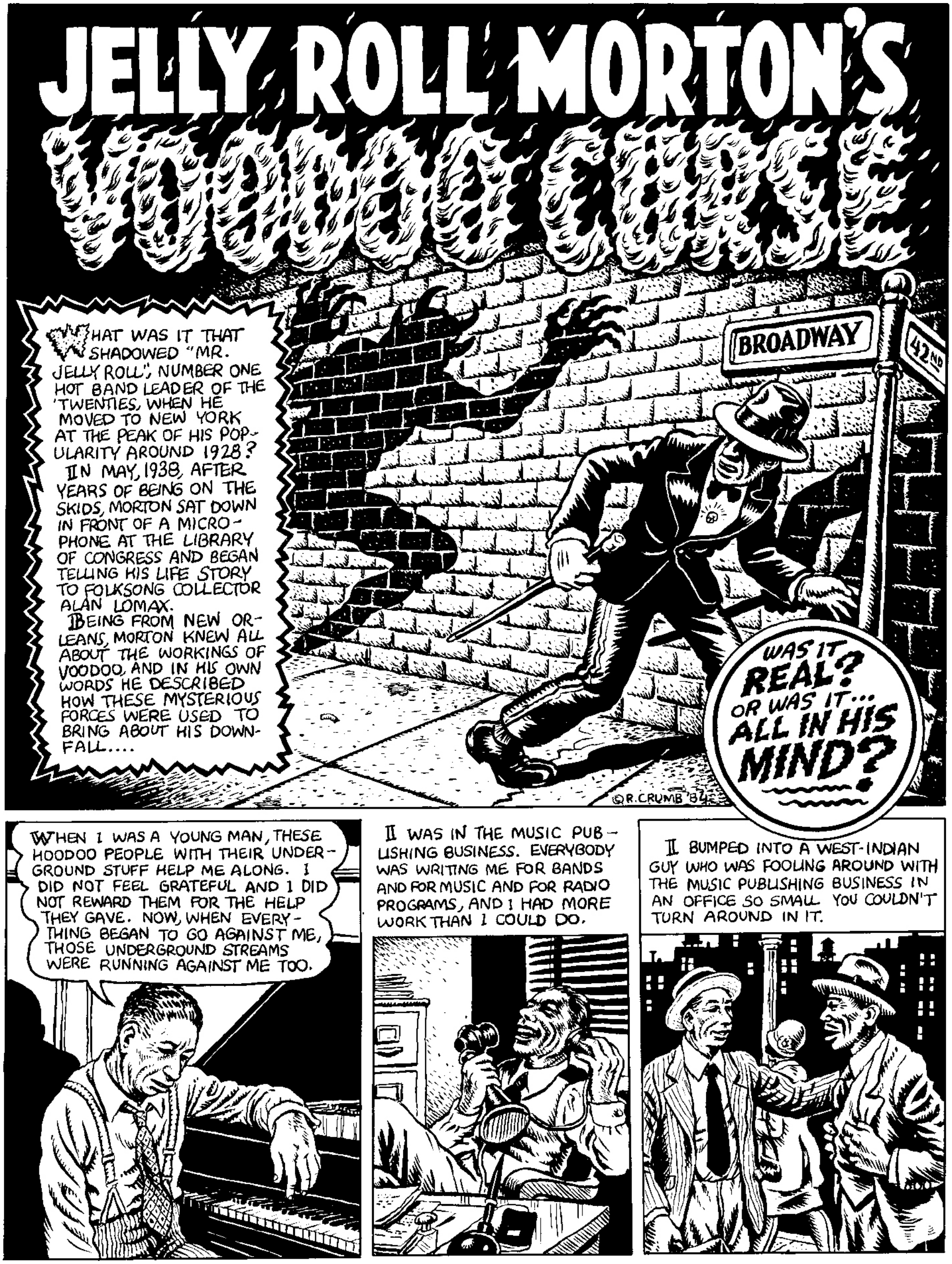
“The Religious Experience of Philip K. Dick,” *Weirdo* no. 17, Summer 1985.

Perhaps his finest brushwork was for the six-page story “The Voodoo Curse of Jelly Roll Morton,” published in *Raw* 7, in 1985. Mixed into that publication’s Expressionist painting, Mannerist drawing, psychedelic linework, and art-brut imagery, Robert’s inky noir looks radical in its entrenched quasi-EC language of his youth. In the tale of Jelly Roll Morton, he had both a musician he admired and a character obsessed, as he was, with what lay behind his fate, which “lent itself to comic book rendition respectful and serious but at the same time kind of absurd.” The opening panel of the story traffics in the lurid symbology of a 1920s Paramount Records advertisement: Morton, diamond brooch glimmering on his tuxedo shirt, lurches away from a shadowy creature at the tilted corner of Broadway and Forty-Second Street. As with “The Religious Experience…,” Robert stays with his subject—the story is lush and lurid, filled with Depression-era cars and buildings Robert knew from years of studying old photographs in books and magazines, attempting to summon a mental image of the time for his own pleasure. Robert focused on moments of high drama. When Morton pushes his enemy out of the office door and into the far right of the panel, the folds in his shirt, vest, and tie pull the narrative forward.

As we read Morton’s tale in his own voice, graceful skeins of ink imbue eyes, limbs, doors, and windows with dramatic life, creating a haunted world to match the occult tenor of the scenario. In the final sequence Morton becomes ill and his first wife, Anita Gonzales, assumes the narrative voice. Suddenly we are viewing her and interviewer Alan Lomax in his sparse office as she describes Morton’s death. The next panel is a wordless image of Anita sitting in darkness. In the next and final panel, now framed by a window and a bouquet, Gonzales tells a startled Lomax: “Oh, be sure to mention my tourist camp in your book, Mr. Lomax. Our chicken dinners are recommended by Duncan Hines.” Stopping the rolling momentum with the visual equivalent of an abrupt turnaround, Robert reminds us that this is a world, his world and ours, in which art, commerce, and mysticism live on the same horizon. As much as he is willing to go metaphysical, he knows that the boundary between it and marketing, between heaven and earth, is porous at best. Over and over in his sketchbooks, Robert delineates the physical world around him while asking, about existence, “What the hell IS this?” Much like tempting fate, the secret is to be aware, be awake. Aline used to tell him he was waiting for some fabulous epiphany, and she was right, but just as surely he knew it was likely never coming. There is no such thing as rarefied heights: if you’re making your own reality, aware of the possibilities, you know that it’s all on the same level.

Robert’s summoning of places, times, and wild moments included a dedicated attempt at making old-time music live amid the noise of the latter years of the twentieth century. It was one thing to indelibly re-create appearances for record covers, still another to create vivid stories of their lives. Why not also portraits that would bring these musicians out of anonymity, allowing them the dignity befitting artists who shaped American popular music? In the mid-1970s, Robert had the idea that Nick Perls’s Yazoo Records could sell packs of trading cards featuring his drawings of some of his favorite performers. Perls countered that boxed sets might be more profitable. The project eventually became three releases: *Heroes of the Blues* and *Early Jazz Greats* (each thirty-six cards), and *Pioneers of Country Music* (forty cards), released from 1980 to 1985. He was well paid for the work, $7,500 for the jazz set alone. The sets were popular in record stores, gift shops, and comic book stores, bringing awareness of the musicians and their music to yet a larger audience.

Robert took a devotional approach to the work, often drawing from the only known image of a singer or group. Sometimes, certainly in the case of the blues musicians, the source was a poorly printed advertisement offering the shape and basic features of, say, Bo Weavil Jackson, but not the details of his face and hands. That was for Robert to invent with a quavering Rapidograph line. For *Early Jazz Greats* he switched to watercolor, which loosened the hold of the photographs by letting the medium do some work for him, the washes of color bringing deep-hued energy to the images. Lammar Wright, a cornet player, shown in a yellow and blue suit, horn tucked under his arm, proudly looks back at us through history.


JELLY ROLL MORTON'S
VOODOO CURSE
WHAT WAS IT THAT SHADOWED "MR. JELLY ROLL", NUMBER ONE HOT BAND LEADER OF THE 'TWENTIES, WHEN HE MOVED TO NEW YORK AT THE PEAK OF HIS POPULARITY AROUND 1928?
IN MAY, 1938, AFTER YEARS OF BEING ON THE SKIDS, MORTON SAT DOWN IN FRONT OF A MICROPHONE AT THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS AND BEGAN TELLING HIS LIFE STORY TO FOLKSONG COLLECTOR ALAN LOMAX.
BEING FROM NEW ORLEANS, MORTON KNEW ALL ABOUT THE WORKINGS OF VOODOO, AND IN HIS OWN WORDS HE DESCRIBED HOW THESE MYSTERIOUS FORCES WERE USED TO BRING ABOUT HIS DOWNFALL....
BROADWAY
42ND
WAS IT REAL? OR WAS IT... ALL IN HIS MIND?
©R.CRUMB '84
WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MAN, THESE HOODOO PEOPLE WITH THEIR UNDERGROUND STUFF HELP ME ALONG. I DID NOT FEEL GRATEFUL AND I DID NOT REWARD THEM FOR THE HELP THEY GAVE. NOW, WHEN EVERYTHING BEGAN TO GO AGAINST ME, THOSE UNDERGROUND STREAMS WERE RUNNING AGAINST ME TOO.
I WAS IN THE MUSIC PUBLISHING BUSINESS. EVERYBODY WAS WRITING ME FOR BANDS AND FOR MUSIC AND FOR RADIO PROGRAMS, AND I HAD MORE WORK THAN I COULD DO.
I BUMPED INTO A WEST-INDIAN GUY WHO WAS FOOLING AROUND WITH THE MUSIC PUBLISHING BUSINESS IN AN OFFICE SO SMALL YOU COULDN'T TURN AROUND IN IT.

"Jelly Roll Morton's Voodoo Curse," *Raw* no. 7, May 1985.

The numerous lesser-known musicians here—in the case of jazz, not just Louis Armstrong but pianist and arranger Alex Hill, or in the case of the blues, not only Mississippi John Hurt but the sui generis guitarist Ed Bell—make a point that it's about music, not fame or notoriety. A single great record, providing a transporting experience, is enough to merit our respect and admiration. Robert's selections parallel the way he listens to music: the experience of listening to one song at a time on a 78, the ritual of having to lift the needle, put away the record, choose another, and put that one on the turntable, effectively equalizes the listening experience between Armstrong and Hill. It's the same sense of egalitarianism and curiosity that led him to publish relative unknowns in *Weirdo*. If there is a lesson in his creative rebirth of the 1980s, it is that he found his way back by putting aside his LSD visions and focusing on exploring past and present life by reengaging with the musical and visual languages that nurtured him.

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CHAPTER 20

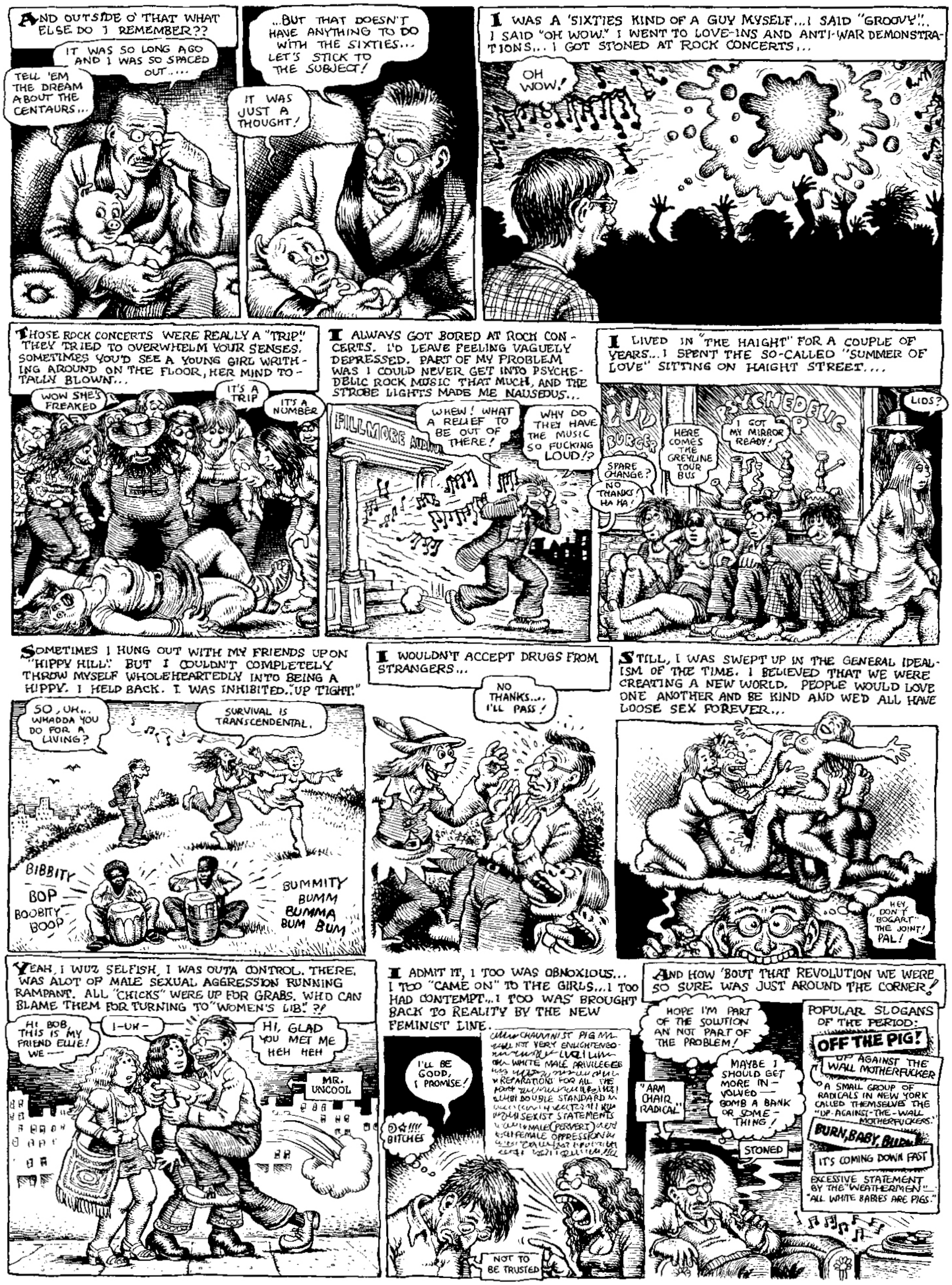
Everything Old Is New Again

In the mideighties nostalgia for the 1960s crept into the mainstream. The hippies were now upper-middle-class strivers with money to spend. A leader of the Yippies, and one of the Chicago Eight, Jerry Rubin, became a stockbroker in 1980. Television shows like *Happy Days* insisted on a clean, trauma-free 1950s, and the rise of Ronald Reagan inserted a movie cowboy into the White House, a tough and smiling daddy to right the wrongs of the scraggly revolutionaries.

The June 1983 issue of *High Times* was "the Fabulous '60s Issue," and what better way to call back to those years than a cover featuring Robert's optimistic 1972 portrait of Mr. Natural atop a tractor in a field with the headline: "TWAS EVER THUS Says Mr. Natural." The issue both romanticized and satirized the sixties—Allen Ginsberg contributed a poem; the magazine's editor printed a photograph of right-wing figure G. Gordon Liddy and onetime LSD evangelist Timothy Leary, now pals playfully jousting for cash on the nostalgia circuit. And *Realist* editor Paul Krassner announced that he and all the rest of the "icons" had become parodies of themselves. Robert contributed "I Remember the Sixties," originally published just eighteen months earlier in *Weirdo* 4, a densely rendered five-page account of both his own and his generation's experience. It opens with a pipe-puffing and smoking-jacketed Robert, holding Prufrock Piggy, an ambiguous, wisecracking little trickster figure. Robert pictures the moment when paranoia and speed entered the Haight as a ghastly spirit stalking a desolate cityscape, the crash of the revolution as a wave tumbling onto the beach; he makes fun of himself all along—as a suffering Christ, a zoned-out LSD visionary, and finally, just another loser.

Robert was saved from the fate of Krassner and his crew because, unlike most of the rock musicians recycling the oldies and the poster artists still offering lysergic garnishes to what remained of Jefferson Airplane for commemorative events and greatest-hits compilations, Robert not only stayed in creative motion but kept improving. And he was careful to shoot himself in the foot if he felt himself getting too close to the mainstream. Robert and Aline were lower-middle-class in the 1980s. It was a bit hectic, juggling parenthood, making a living, and making art. Their willingness to allow each other to have extramarital adventures helped keep them together, really, amid a stress neither of them had a model for. Their friends were either more grounded in the land and the place, had jobs, or didn't have children. Their particular balance was uncommon: two artist parents, far from any family (not that they would've been any help), trying to make a life together without cranking up the R. Crumb merchandise machine. He routinely declined film offers and merchandise deals, including $20,000 for a line of Mr. Natural cuddly dolls.

He did, however, accept projects that would put him out of the range of acceptable celebrity, such as a 1984 all-nude "Photo-Funnies" for the pornography magazine *Oui*. Some gigs he took on were close to his political heart, like a new cover and a dozen interior illustrations for the 1985 reissue of novelist and ecologist Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, a novel originally published in 1975 about a group of environmentalist activists who sabotage development projects in the author's beloved Rocky Mountains region. When Robert and Abbey embarked on a widely attended national book tour during which the two men were greeted as veritable time travelers from another era—a time of high ideals and activism—with it came ample media coverage, including a five-page story in *People Weekly* with the subtitle “After some tough years, the legendary ’60s cartoonist is truckin’ again.” In a fairly accurate description of Robert then and now, the piece opens in Moab, Utah, where he was doing a signing with Abbey: “He saunters over the sun-blasted sand in a tweed sports jacket, cuffed trousers, argyle socks, sensible black shoes and a dark fedora.” His old American Greetings boss, Tom Wilson, now beloved for his comic strip *Ziggy*, chimed in: “He was like a kid whose parents locked him in an attic of old records and old magazines. His taste in everything comes from a time when he did not exist.” The profile concluded in Winters with Robert chopping wood for the stove.


AND OUTSIDE O' THAT WHAT ELSE DO I REMEMBER??
IT WAS SO LONG AGO AND I WAS SO SPACED OUT....
TELL 'EM THE DREAM ABOUT THE CENTAURS...
...BUT THAT DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE SIXTIES... LET'S STICK TO THE SUBJECT!
IT WAS JUST A THOUGHT!
I WAS A 'SIXTIES KIND OF A GUY MYSELF...I SAID "GROOVY"... I SAID "OH WOW." I WENT TO LOVE-INS AND ANTI-WAR DEMONSTRATIONS... I GOT STONED AT ROCK CONCERTS...
OH WOW!
THOSE ROCK CONCERTS WERE REALLY A "TRIP!" THEY TRIED TO OVERWHELM YOUR SENSES. SOMETIMES YOU'D SEE A YOUNG GIRL WRITHING AROUND ON THE FLOOR, HER MIND TOTALLY BLOWN...
WOW SHE'S FREAKED
IT'S A TRIP
IT'S A NUMBER
I ALWAYS GOT BORED AT ROCK CONCERTS. I'D LEAVE FEELING VAGUELY DEPRESSED. PART OF MY PROBLEM WAS I COULD NEVER GET INTO PSYCHEDELIC ROCK MUSIC THAT MUCH, AND THE STROBE LIGHTS MADE ME NAUSEOUS...
FILLMORE AUDI
WHEW! WHAT A RELIEF TO BE OUT OF THERE!
WHY DO THEY HAVE THE MUSIC SO FUCKING LOUD!?
I LIVED IN "THE HAIGHT" FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS...I SPENT THE SO-CALLED "SUMMER OF LOVE" SITTING ON HAIGHT STREET....
LU BURGER
PSYCHEDELIC SHOP
LIDS?
I GOT MY MIRROR READY!
HERE COMES THE GREYLINE TOUR BUS
SPARE CHANGE?
NO THANKS! HA HA!
SOMETIMES I HUNG OUT WITH MY FRIENDS UP ON "HIPPY HILL." BUT I COULDN'T COMPLETELY THROW MYSELF WHOLEHEARTEDLY INTO BEING A HIPPY. I HELD BACK. I WAS INHIBITED..."UP TIGHT."
SO, UH... WHADDA YOU DO FOR A LIVING?
SURVIVAL IS TRANSCENDENTAL.
BIBBITY BOP BOOBITY BOOP
BUMMITY BUMM BUMMA BUM BUM
I WOULDN'T ACCEPT DRUGS FROM STRANGERS...
NO THANKS... I'LL PASS!
STILL, I WAS SWEPT UP IN THE GENERAL IDEALISM OF THE TIME. I BELIEVED THAT WE WERE CREATING A NEW WORLD. PEOPLE WOULD LOVE ONE ANOTHER AND BE KIND AND WE'D ALL HAVE LOOSE SEX FOREVER...
HEY, DON'T "BOGART" THE JOINT! PAL!
YEAH, I WUZ SELFISH, I WAS OUTA CONTROL. THERE WAS ALOT OF MALE SEXUAL AGGRESSION RUNNING RAMPANT. ALL "CHICKS" WERE UP FOR GRABS. WHO CAN BLAME THEM FOR TURNING TO "WOMEN'S LIB!" ?!
HI BOB, THIS IS MY FRIEND ELLIE! WE —
I-UH-
HI, GLAD YOU MET ME HEH HEH
MR. UNCOOL
I ADMIT IT, I TOO WAS OBNOXIOUS... I TOO "CAME ON" TO THE GIRLS...I TOO HAD CONTEMPT...I TOO WAS BROUGHT BACK TO REALITY BY THE NEW FEMINIST LINE.
I'LL BE GOOD, I PROMISE!
☺☆!!!! BITCHES
CHAUVINIST PIG
NOT VERY ENLIGHTENED
WHITE MALE PRIVILEGES
REPARATIONS FOR ALL THE
DOUBLE STANDARD
SEXIST STATEMENTS
MALE (PERVERT)
FEMALE OPPRESSION
NOT TO BE TRUSTED
AND HOW 'BOUT THAT REVOLUTION WE WERE SO SURE WAS JUST AROUND THE CORNER!
HOPE I'M PART OF THE SOLUTION AN' NOT PART OF THE PROBLEM!
MAYBE I SHOULD GET MORE INVOLVED — BOMB A BANK OR SOMETHING!
"ARM CHAIR RADICAL"
STONED
POPULAR SLOGANS OF THE PERIOD:
OFF THE PIG!
UP AGAINST THE WALL MOTHERFUCKER
A SMALL GROUP OF RADICALS IN NEW YORK CALLED THEMSELVES THE "UP-AGAINST-THE-WALL MOTHERFUCKERS."
BURN, BABY, BURN
IT'S COMING DOWN FAST
EXCESSIVE STATEMENT BY THE "WEATHERMEN" — "ALL WHITE BABIES ARE PIGS."

"I Remember the Sixties," *Weirdo* no. 4, 1981–82.

But Robert wasn't home much that year. He was hustling around fulfilling suddenly proliferating commitments that he needed to honor for friendship or money. Also in 1985, *Zap* 11 was published by Last Gasp; the whole gang reunited for a signing at a popular Los Angeles comic book store otherwise occupied mostly by superhero comic books. Older but not much wiser, the cartoonists had that distinctly middle-aged look of the decade—ill-fitting jeans and wrinkled oxford cloth shirts. That September, a particularly insistent young promoter offered Robert a good fee to undertake a four-week signing tour in England and Ireland. Then it was off to Paris for a comic book convention, and then incredibly, Robert attended the Dallas Fantasy Festival. He was burning out again, but with a young child to support, a mortgage to pay, and records to buy, he needed all the money he could, in good conscience, take. The BBC approached him that year, offering $1,000 for his participation in a television program about his life. Robert demanded $5,000 and immediately got it. The documentary was released in 1987 as *The Confessions of Robert Crumb*. He agreed to the production on the condition that he could script it, ensuring that he and Aline would maintain full control over their message, but also allowing him to exercise the photo-funnies part of his brain. Robert inhabits his *Weirdo* persona for some staged scenes—one in which he plays the creep lurking outside the window of Aline's Jazzercise class, another in which he uses his girlfriend Carol to demonstrate the "bean" form, and a skit of Robert in a nineteenth-century smock on the side of a highway, a man out of time and technology. Shot in nine days in Winters and Davis, the documentary is a stilted artifact, Robert and Aline's dialogue never assuming a natural rhythm.

The entire year had been marked by introspection and public exposure. Drawing was usually the mediating force between him and his public, a way to process and shape information free of any immediate human reactions. But without that filter the attention was dizzying. In January 1986, he went to Miami to see Aline's family, then went on to a four-day stay with Nick Perls in New York, then, with Aline and Sophie, back to France for what became a three-month stay. First he was a guest at the International Comics Festival of Angoulême. For the French newspaper *Liberation* Robert drew a two-page comic about his time at the festival. Then it was on to Cologne, Germany, for a day of public appearances and an onstage talk during which, his nerves frayed, he lost his temper at Aline—telling her to shut up so he could get a word in, and deeply hurting her. Then it was back to Paris for a signing and an extended time in the city. They first stayed in an expensive, newly built, and thoroughly alienating apartment on Avenue du Maine. Aline loved going out to tour the city, but Robert, burned out from too much public exposure over the past year and craving time to himself, spiraled into the worst depression he'd felt since he was nineteen. He wasn't getting any work done, and the rage was bubbling up. Every so often, Robert agrees to a few too many projects, a few too many obligations, and the result is a moment of existential despair mixed with an intense need to escape.

One morning in the Avenue du Maine apartment he cracked, and, as he had in 1962, contemplated suicide. He stood at the open window six stories up, gazing at the street below. But as when he was nineteen, Robert decided he would need to do something about his problems, deal with them, rather than kill himself. He wrote to Terry Zwigoff: "It was only sheer cowardice stopped me from leaping off the balcony of our sixth-floor apartment into the street below... I'm still trying to figure out what it's about... I'm still not exactly in a cheerful mood... Needless to say I wasn't feeling terribly warm-hearted towards Aline through all this... The temptation was, and is, to blame her for all this, but I realized after contemplating suicide that it's not her fault that I don't take control of my own destiny, that I let her and everyone else push and pull me in every direction… Of course, she'll drag me to Europe if I let her… Of course she'll foist Sophie on me whenever she can if I let her… It's only human nature… She's not particularly selfish or cruel… Smart, she is, yes… A formidable force to be dealt with… But basically I like her and don't really want to break up with her… Sophie too is a formidable force to be dealt with… My fame is a formidable force… Lots of things are formidable. I've got to learn to cope with it or it's going to kill me, that's what it comes down to… Get tough or die… I must learn to stand up for myself and not be pushed around… Yeah, right, sure…"

Robert found some solace in his record collecting. Despite the bitter cold that winter, early every Saturday or Sunday morning he got on the Metro to make the rounds of flea markets. A couple of vendors at Clignancourt had lots of 78s piled in horizontal stacks. He remembers: "The kind of French music I was looking for was [an] old type of working-class and petit bourgeois dance music commonly called 'musette,' played by accordion-led 'orchestres des bals musettes.' Many of the tunes were sweet, sad, beautiful. It reflected a mood uniquely French and of the post–World War I period. France had lost 1.2 million men in that war. I could hear it in this music. I also got a sense from the usually small, three- or four-piece 'orchestres,' sometimes even only an accordion with banjo (still called an 'orchestre'), that they performed in small, cramped places. These were called 'bals,' tiny neighborhood places where the locals went after work to dance with their wives or girlfriends. There were hundreds of these bals in Paris. Some of them were dangerous places patronized by petty criminals, the 'apaches,' and prostitutes, there were also many bigger dance halls, a bit more upscale, where larger groups played, alternating with jazz and tango bands. The local record companies recorded all of it, prolifically. And these records were there at the flea markets for the taking, a few francs apiece (around 25 to 50 cents, sometimes a dollar). I quickly amassed a large stack and shipped them all back home to California." In that same period, Lora Fountain and Gilbert Shelton, who had recently moved to Paris, introduced Robert to Dominique Cravic, a young guitar player who was a fan of the Cheap Suit Serenaders and had a band that played old-time American music. Cravic and his bandmates were surprised by Robert's interest in what they thought of as conservative music, but he urged them to look back to the 1920s "golden age" of the genre. Soon Cravic brought on an accordion player and, with Robert on mandolin, began playing both traditional and new musette songs under the name Les Primitifs du Futur.

Aside from his new musical interests, 1986 wasn't much better: Robert began getting the retrospective treatment. Fantagraphics cofounder Gary Groth conducted his longest published interview to date, for the *Comics Journal*, and soon after proposed *The Complete Crumb Comics*, which began publishing in 1987. At the time, Robert asked for $5,000, exactly what he needed to build a new well for the house in Winters. Groth borrowed the money from his parents and they struck a deal. This was the first completist project for a living American cartoonist. Even in Europe, only Tintin's creator, Hergé, had received that treatment. The series began with *Foo*, included covers to *Note, Arcade*, and *Farb*, as well as his hitherto unpublished pencil-drawn early Fritz the Cat stories, showing how embedded he was in comics-making long before the underground. The first three volumes featured introductions by Marty Pahls. He and Robert sat in his apartment for a handful of sessions totaling thirteen hours of interviews for essays that detailed the early life of his friend and his family.

But it was, once again, too much. At the end of 1986, Robert, Aline, and Sophie were traveling to Miami to see her parents. As they were changing planes in Dallas, Robert turned to Aline and told her he couldn't go on. Seeing his stricken face, she agreed. He booked a flight back to San Francisco and caught a bus home. Back in Winters, he spent two weeks alone, gradually recovering his equilibrium.

* * *

Robert resumed his life in California in early 1987. He was still sometimes involved with Carol Engberg, who had moved from Davis down to Oakland, as well as Mary, whom he would visit in San Francisco and who soon ended the affair so she could focus on having a family of her own. He was now getting to know another Carol (Aline used to joke about the "legions of Carols")—Vinson. They had met the previous autumn, when her cartoonist boyfriend, Mike Parlette, cold-called Robert and, by way of trying to arrange a meeting, offered for him to come to Sacramento and draw Vinson with him. He promised that she looked like one of Robert's drawings. And she did—as Robert recalls, she was "a big, sturdy built woman with powerful, shapely legs and a quite beautiful face." She was not, however, thrilled to pose for the artistes. After a brief argument with Parlette, she reluctantly emerged in shorts and a tank top. According to Robert, "Parlette's drawing of her was not good. He didn't seem to appreciate the splendid curves of her physique at all. I commenced to give him a lecture while Carol continued to stand there posing, a blank look on her noble face. I said, 'Parlette, look at the exquisite, graceful curves of her legs! I mean, look at this!' And I then ran my hand lightly over the back of her leg. She did not react in any way, stood like a statue, but much later she told me that my fondling of her leg was very erotic to her, a new experience. No man had ever expressed such admiration for her body before!"

Vinson, thirty-three, was born in a small farm town in the northern Central Valley of California called Corning and attended college in Sacramento. She stayed on in the city and managed a Mexican restaurant. Smart and hardworking, her demure personality and athletic build were Robert's favorite combination of mental and physical traits.

Parlette and Aline had a brief fling, which opened the door for Robert and Carol to begin an affair of their own in the summer of 1987. One night at her small, bland two-bedroom apartment, Parlette went out for a while, leaving Vinson and Robert alone together. They had chatted over the months and built up a tension. It wasn't long before they were making out. She was Robert's fantasy incarnate: his ideal thick build, sexually uninhibited, and totally accepting of his erotic preferences. He loved to test her strength, to take piggyback rides with her, and to engage in sex play that could go on all day. Sex, rest, read, sex, eat, repeat. She was disinterested in comics, fame, money, and disrupting his marriage. Vinson was generally put off by men, had no interest, she told him, in having a long-term relationship with anyone. Their affair was a respite for Robert and, in his intense devotion to and respect for her, a stable, encouraging presence in her life.

They carried on a relationship, with Aline's knowledge (and alongside her own affairs), that lasted thirty-two years. She was Aline's opposite in many ways. While Aline was urban and social, Vinson was rural, shy, and socially awkward. Unimpressed by fads, fame, and trends, she was contemptuous of "boy stuff" and was an avid reader. They would talk about the meaning of life, their childhoods. "She possessed strong moral rectitude," Robert wrote. "She wouldn't know how to lie or deceive anyone. She's not especially conscious of it. And in a way it does make her simple, not alert to the levels of scheming and conniving that are always going on around her. Her experience of the predatory nature of human society is sufficient enough that she feels she needs to stay somewhat removed from it not to be burned too badly, not to be ensnared, as happened to her when she was young."

Robert's trips to San Francisco continued. He'd take the Greyhound bus and the Bay Area Rapid Transit to Terry's place, where he stayed in an old iron-framed bed in his friend's unfinished basement. It wasn't much, but it was private, and Terry's record collection was just upstairs. Most days he'd go downtown or to Haight-Ashbury, sit in cafés and draw in his sketchbook, visit friends, and take care of business with his publishers and his gallery, Martin Muller's Modernism Gallery. He'd met Muller through John Martin, the proprietor of Black Sparrow Press. Martin brought him back together with Charles Bukowski for a couple of illustrated chapbooks. As with the work in *Arcade*, the two made a good match. Bukowski's spare, blunt language is given layers of humanity with Robert's crosshatching that emphasizes grotty corners, tarnished curtains, and overindulged flesh. Since 1983, Muller's gallery had been mounting solo exhibitions of drawings by Robert, earning him $10,000 in 1983 alone. Modernism did good business for Robert in the 1980s and '90s, and was one of a handful of reliable revenue streams, along with royalties, illustration jobs, and yet another place he'd sometimes visit in the city with Spain and Terry Zwigoff: Artie and Jim Mitchell's O'Farrell Theatre.

The Mitchell brothers began as filmmaking bohemians with artistic ambitions but, like *Screw*'s Al Goldstein and many others, saw an opportunity in the sexual revolution. Their 1972 porn feature, *Behind the Green Door*, was the second-highest-grossing adult film in history. Like *Deep Throat*, it captured a mainstream audience still just liberal enough to be curious about the very idea of a feature-length sex film. Pleasure was one of the last vestiges of the counterculture, and suddenly, in response to customer demand, strip clubs and XXX movie theaters were popping up all over the United States. Once they had their first hit, the brothers opened a strip club as well, which became, as their biographer put it, "a uniquely San Francisco version of a cafe on the left bank in Paris or a coffeehouse in Greenwich Village. Like all true bohemians, Jim, Artie, and their film crew were carrying on a mutiny against middle-class values. Waging that rebellion was the real fun." The likes of Hunter S. Thompson, Warren Hinckle, and Margo St. James and other members of San Francisco's libertine elite mingled in the club alongside the performers and staff. For a time, the O'Farrell also gave a weekly space to avant-garde film and performance—the Nickelettes, a performance group founded by two employees, mounted their own shows for a couple of months.

The Mitchells had affection for the underground comics scene, and the male cartoonists enjoyed the beautiful women and respected the libertine environment. It also helped that they were paid ample sums to draw logos and advertisements. Robert remembered, "They had a safe full of cash. They would go down to the safe, open it up, and pull out a wad of twenties that were bundled and they would just hand it to you and say, 'Count it.' They had a big pile of cocaine up there in the office on the desk. It was almost like in *Scarface*—'Roll up a dollar bill and sniff this big pile of cocaine.' I never did. It was fun hanging around. Sometimes they would bring girls up to the office and Artie would encourage you to maul them. I couldn't do it, I couldn't handle it. It was just too much, too sleazy. The girls seemed to be too detached."

In 1987, Jim Mitchell called Terry to see if he would edit a film they'd made on Hunter S. Thompson. In the years since the Suits, Terry had built a reputation as a filmmaker. In 1985, he released *Louie Bluie*, his sixty-minute documentary about old-time musician Howard Armstrong. It received critical praise and competed in the Sundance Film Festival the following year. The Mitchells figured he could help them out. He wasn't, however, a magician. The brothers, used to dubbing in effects in porn films, didn't bother to record the sound on their Thompson film. They wanted a ninety-minute documentary, but Terry threw up his hands and declined the project.

Now the brothers asked Terry to bring Robert over to the club to pitch a porn film starring Mr. Natural. Visions of Fritz dancing in his head, Robert passed but counteroffered with a film based on his 1972 comic "Whiteman Meets Bigfoot." With that, the Mitchells handed over $10,000 cash in a manila envelope. The old story had passed through two previous options and a script over the years, but it was now Robert's again. Having attempted screenwriting for the BBC, he was mildly intrigued by the new challenge, and Terry, already thinking about how he might fund his next project, a documentary about the Crumb brothers, thought the cash might be helpful.

Writing the script meant finding a balance between Robert's sex fantasies and Terry's sense of narrative and broad social commentary. Robert's primary interest was in Bigfoot, now named Sassy: describing her body in motion and at rest, and in particular Sassy in the throes of ecstasy. This was not Terry's particular kink. "The image of a giant, wild, fur-covered humanoid female didn't fascinate him, or excite him in the least, which was the exact opposite of my emotional stake in the story," Robert wrote. Terry was far more interested in moving the plot along and satirizing, as he would in his later films, the desiccated cities and suburbs of America.

They finished a pretty close adaptation of the comic in 1988 and, back in the upstairs office at the O'Farrell, proudly handed over the script to the brothers. The coked-up entrepreneurs flipped through the pages, tossed it back on the desk, and announced they could spend a few million dollars and would begin shooting the following week. They'd wing it, like they did with all their porn films, rolling on scenes until it worked out. Terry protested that they needed real actors, costumes, hair, a cinematographer, lighting, the whole shebang. That seemed to slow things down. They looked back and forth at Robert and Terry and said, "You know what, keep the money, not a problem. If you guys ever make the film, you sell your script somewhere else and you make money, you break even, pay us back five thousand dollars." They never did.

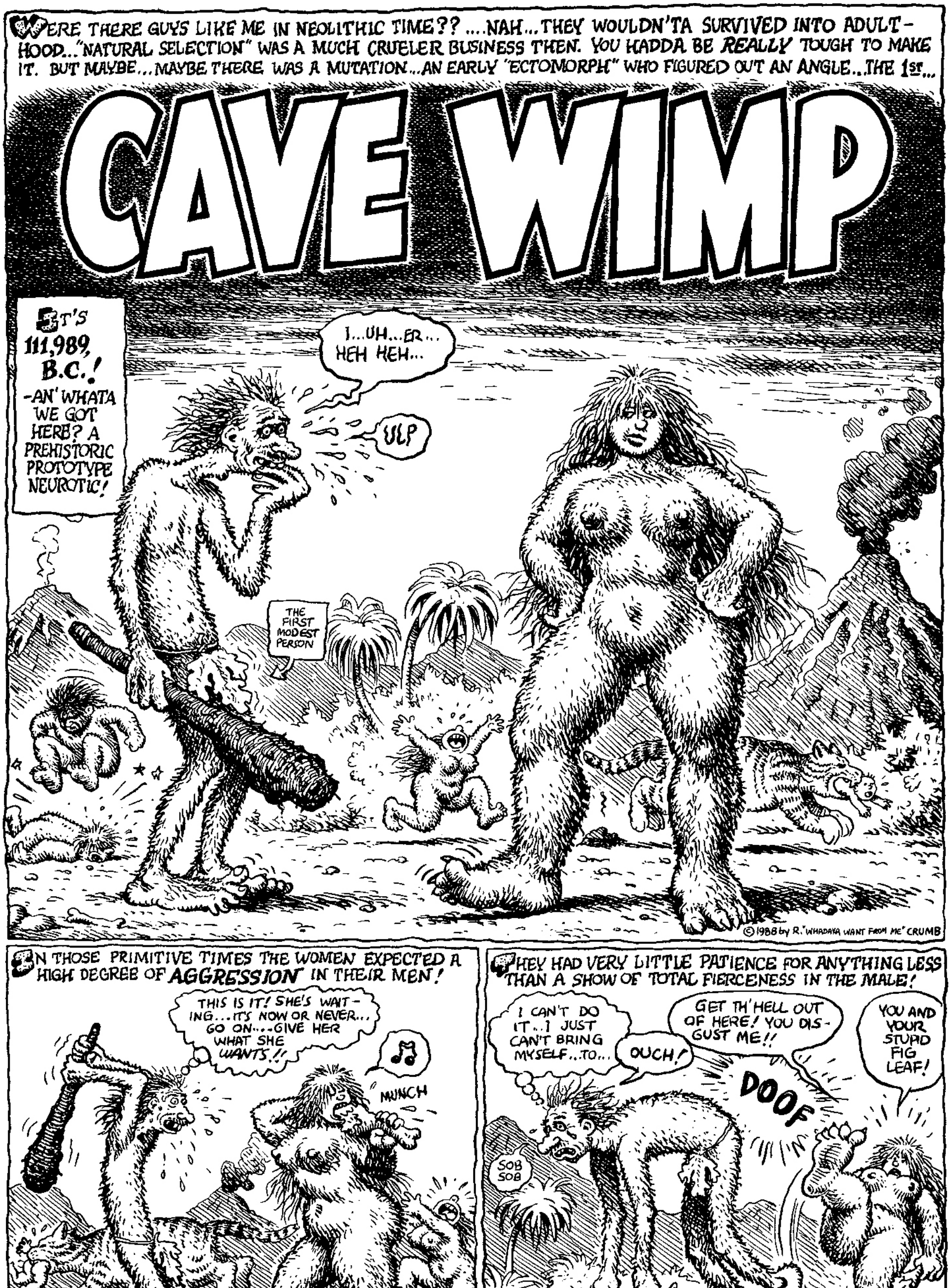
Nevertheless, now Robert and Terry had been bitten by the movie bug. It seemed like a short hop from cartooning to cinema, but no such luck. The solitary and tightly controlled art of making comics is a long ways away from the collaborative form of filmmaking. Terry wrote a 1920s domestic comedy called *Anything for Money* about a bickering married couple (based on the comic strip *The Bungle Family*); when it was suggested that Terry update the story to the present, Robert offered to take a pass at the script. Then they shopped both *Sassy* and *Anything for Money*, using the Crumb celebrity aura to get meetings. Terry remembered: "Some broken down lawyer took us out to lunch at Musso and Frank's and when he paid cash I knew he wasn't anyone who could get this film made."

For Robert, his adventures in screenwriting gave him an education in story structure, which he applied to his narrative comics going forward, particularly the final story of Mode O'Day, a hard-striving, pretentious young professional woman; her grumpy pal Doggo; and a tech nerd porpoise called Porpy. Running in five issues of *Weirdo, Mode O'Day* is Robert's satirical take on the decadence and ruthlessness of the professional class around him in Northern California. In the 1960s and early '70s, striving for money was a source of internal conflict and shame. In the Reagan era it was encouraged and rewarded. Cocaine wasn't just for a San Francisco strip club—now family friends in Davis were dealing the powder. Robert's carefully plotted eleven-page final strip from 1990, simply called "Mode O'Day," has our heroine starting and running a restaurant into the ground. It's a finely observed spoof—Mode, scampering over puddles and garbage to the back door of the restaurant, just wishes the neighborhood would gentrify already. Her investors live in a McMansion with fabulously impractical lighting and drive a Jaguar with the latest gadget: a car phone. The restaurant is robbed once, and then after it shutters, Mode and Doggo strip it for every last commodity.

"Cave Wimp," which appeared in the otherwise mediocre *Zap* 12, published in 1989 was another product of Robert's labor in the Hollywood mines. An eleven-page story in a six-panel grid, it inverts the prehistoric-cartoon genre (think *The Flintstones*) and centers Robert's stand-in, the Wimp. Unable to impress the strong Yeti-like women who value brute strength and ruthlessness above all else, the Wimp retreats to his cave and masturbates to his own *Venus of Willendorf*–like sculptures. After attacks by the alpha males, the Wimp briefly finds peace and success by bartering his little female figures with the tribe's chieftains. Just as the Wimp manages to have sex, he is thrown into a bog. The Wimp's last words are: "I'm not afraid to die—I've had my little fun—I've left my little mark—so fuck you, all you thick-skulled bastards!" The story and the protagonist's parting dialogue comprise a pretty accurate summary of Robert's point of view: art in service to power, artist in service to his libido, and society as a censorious force. The plotting, with its quest, reversals, and denouement, is one of his tightest, and the drawing convincingly grotty, even if the ultimate payoff is little more than his usual shrug.

Terry also learned a few things from his experience in movies: he did not think he was as good with dialogue as Robert but felt that he could recognize and shape a good story. Like his friend Robert, though, he was a perpetual outsider with few connections to the film world, despite the modest success of *Louie Bluie*, for which Robert drew the poster. He'd been fascinated by the Crumb clan since his 1975 visit to the family home and of course knew Maxon in San Francisco. Like Marty Pahls before him, Terry considered them a family of geniuses. He liked to rib Robert that it was Charles, in fact, who was the greatest of them all. These indelible personalities would, he figured, come through with striking clarity on film.

Robert declined Terry’s initial imprecations. He had just endured a hellish couple of years of public exposure. On the other hand, Terry was his friend, Robert loved *Louie Bluie*, he wanted to help him, and he trusted Terry to do a good job. He came around when Terry explained that the film would be about the three brothers. So, with Robert’s blessing, Zwigoff gathered what little financing he could and embarked on the project. Robert made himself available to his friend, spending days and days over a period of years in order to make the film. For Robert, feeling watched and exposed was torturous.


WERE THERE GUYS LIKE ME IN NEOLITHIC TIME?? ....NAH...THEY WOULDN'TA SURVIVED INTO ADULTHOOD..."NATURAL SELECTION" WAS A MUCH CRUELER BUSINESS THEN. YOU HADDA BE *REALLY* TOUGH TO MAKE IT. BUT MAYBE... MAYBE THERE WAS A MUTATION...AN EARLY "ECTOMORPH" WHO FIGURED OUT AN ANGLE...THE 1ST...
CAVE WIMP
IT'S 111,989, B.C.! -AN' WHATA WE GOT HERE? A PREHISTORIC PROTOTYPE NEUROTIC!
I...UH...ER... HEH HEH...
ULP
THE FIRST MODEST PERSON
©1988 by R. "WHADAYA WANT FROM ME" CRUMB
IN THOSE PRIMITIVE TIMES THE WOMEN EXPECTED A HIGH DEGREE OF **AGGRESSION** IN THEIR MEN!
THIS IS IT! SHE'S WAITING... IT'S NOW OR NEVER... GO ON.... GIVE HER WHAT SHE *WANTS*!!
♫
MUNCH
THEY HAD VERY LITTLE PATIENCE FOR ANYTHING LESS THAN A SHOW OF TOTAL FIERCENESS IN THE MALE!
I CAN'T DO IT...I JUST CAN'T BRING MYSELF...TO...
OUCH!
GET TH'HELL OUT OF HERE! YOU DISGUST ME!!
YOU AND YOUR STUPID FIG LEAF!
DOOF
SOB SOB

"Cave Wimp," Zap no. 12, 1989.

In October 1990 Robert and Terry flew to Philadelphia to record interviews with Bea and Charles. Shortly after their arrival Bea rescinded her permission to be filmed. For three days Terry lobbied her on the phone from his Philadelphia motel room. Robert, however, was talking to Bea independently, and whether trying to prepare or dissuade her, he would say things like "Oh, you know, they'll be in here with all the huge lights, trampling through your house with a huge film crew…" Finally, Terry went over to the Crumb home to plead his case, and after a few hours of desperate chatter, he and his crew got inside the house, initially only to film Charles (Terry paid him $500 for his time). Once Bea got used to the presence of the crew, she agreed to be interviewed as well. Bea later called Carol, who had tacitly agreed to participate, and dissuaded her eldest daughter from cooperating. Sandra, for her part, refused from the outset. The scenes inside the house, with Robert chuckling nervously as Charles discusses his illness and fixations, are painful to watch. Robert is in agony as the cameras film his family's strangeness. It's not that he wanted to hide it, but rather that off the page it's once again out of his control, and unbearably sad, too. But he knew that at least Terry was sympathetic and not condescending or patronizing toward the family. It was the last time he saw Charles alive.

For something a little more colorful in the film, Terry filmed a photo shoot in New York for Dian Hanson's fetish magazine *Leg Show*. The setup was a perfect way to encapsulate Robert's sexual fetishes and capture him hamming it up much the same way he did for his photo-funnies. He can be shy like anyone in public, but he's quick with a quip, a pratfall, and Terry had a great forum. What made it into the film is Robert acting the bashful, prototypical nerd-creep, and it served as a way to show his sexual proclivities without actually getting in the bedroom. Robert gamely delivered but upon reflection was horrified: “The terrible feeling of having participated in something sordid and pathetic… something tragically absurd, in which I played the part of the most pathetic of all the fools. I’m telling you, it was traumatic… try putting yourself in my place… how would you feel if, let’s say, you’d foolishly consented to be filmed and photographed in supposed wanton revelry with several attractive young girls in Catholic school girl outfits, with a lot of technicians and other jerks standing around gawking or arguing among themselves. Some or all of the girls having various kinds of derangement and brain-damage, but still, maybe you’re kind of physically attracted to a couple of them, and everybody’s waiting to see what you’re going to do…”

Back in San Francisco, Terry suggested set pieces, like Robert sitting at a bus stop, an advertisement featuring an enormous female face looming over him, as if in ironic judgment. The scenes of Robert drawing were also lightly fictionalized. Robert sometimes couldn’t draw with a camera on him, so Terry chose older work, xeroxed the drawings, eliminated some elements, and glued them into a notebook, so that Robert had a place to start, and the film would appear to catch him in the creative act. He received $5,500 for the use of his artwork.

One major player, though, was absent: Marty Pahls. In 1989, he killed himself by drinking Wite-Out. As the eighties wore on, his diabetes had become crippling, and he rarely left his house. In the unaired BBC documentary footage of Marty Pahls he is still in awe of the brothers as he handles various editions of *Note* and *Arcade*. He’d come to eerily resemble Charles—an excess of flesh, greasy hair, with a high-pitched voice. He’d been unable to maintain himself, living in debris and decay. Robert wrote to inform their old friend Mike Britt of Marty’s passing: “Initially I wasn’t too shocked when I learned of Marty’s death… he’d been going down slowly but surely for ten—maybe even twenty years… but over the months I have felt the loss of him quite a lot—in small ways—so many shared cultural interests—so many ways in which his ideas about things influenced me—so many times when I realize I'll never be able to share this or that with him again—we had a strong mental rapport… even though, in the last couple of years, he became increasingly withdrawn and morbid, and I didn't see him as much… I never was able to figure out what EXACTLY his problem was—what caused him to gradually retreat from the world—to become a hermit, increasingly depressed… when I lived with him in Cleveland in the early Sixties he was always giving me lectures about the futility of morbid self-obsession… he was pretty outgoing back then… full of confidence, lots of girlfriends… what went wrong?? Marrying my sister certainly didn't help his state of mind… then getting diabetes… and so it goes…"

Terry, Robert, and a few others cleaned out his apartment. Terry remembered, "When Marty died his place was just teeming with cockroaches. So, the main order of business was to sell whatever stuff he had of value left, like fanzines and comics and records. Most of the stuff I sold, I had to put in a plastic bag, spray Raid in there, tie it off, and leave it for a while. The last thing I remember witnessing between Robert and Marty is Robert going over there in the last couple months Marty was alive where he was really sick and dying and desperate for money, and Robert going through his record collection and saying, 'Okay, how much for this?' and sort of laughing about it. And I just thought, 'Man, he's really callous,' but I'm sure he was emotionally moved by it, and it was a façade to keep from crying at the time. It was so disturbing." Robert was just trying to keep from weeping, trying to act like old times so as not to upset Marty. Terry sent out a catalog and took mail-order bids that year. Marty's collection of comics and records, and his formidable Crumb brothers archive, brought in $29,000, all of which Terry gave to Marty and Sandra's son, Avery, for his college tuition.

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CHAPTER 21

Time to Go, Again

Terry Zwigoff's film captures, quite by accident, Robert and Aline's last years in America. In the late 1980s they watched with disgust and alarm as America continued its rightward shift from Reagan to President Bush. Around Winters, they did what they could to stave off overdevelopment and other environmentally damaging projects. In 1989, Aline and Craig McNamara worked with a group to successfully prevent the construction of a superconducting supercollider, which would have entailed the construction of a sixty-two-mile oval-shaped tunnel partially underneath the McNamaras' property, also eliminating eight thousand acres of prime farmland. It also happened to cross over an earthquake fault line. Robert drew Mr. Natural saying, with a shrug, "Don't say I didn't warn you!!" as a car labeled "California Supercollider Bandwagon" and full of politicians, scientists, and government officials, each clutching stacks of cash, plunged into an enormous, jagged fissure in the valley. But they could only do so much locally. The country itself felt like it was unraveling: the end of the Cold War meant that the doomsday preppers needed a new target, so they swiveled, seeing enemies within the country. The Crumbs' feeling of alienation was bolstered by the ever-widening income gap caused by deregulation, union busting, and widening privatization. More and more Americans were feeling adrift and trying to shore up their identities through politics and religion.

When Robert and Aline arrived in Winters there were maybe five churches; by 1990 there were thirteen, most of them Christian fundamentalist. Despite the presence of UC Davis, the Central Valley was, like the country, falling into a relatively new mix of evangelical Christianity and right-wing politics, which, most pertinently to Robert, manifested in a crackdown on “pornography” under the guise of protecting the children. In 1986, the manager of the popular Friendly Frank’s comic book store in Lansing, Michigan, was arrested for selling, among other titles, *Weirdo* 17–18. The arresting officer, clearly a devotee of Tipper Gore and Attorney General Edwin Meese III (on this the right and left agreed), said, “If you know what you’re looking for, you can see the satanic influence all over. Three-quarters of the rock groups today show Satanic influence, and it’s all over the television.”

As in Lansing, so in the Central Valley. In 1987, President Reagan pledged to put pornographers out of business—the definition of pornography, of course, being in the localized eye of the beholder. He was armed with a crew of lawyers assembled by Edwin Meese under his prosecutorial task force, called the National Obscenity Enforcement Unit. The strategy was to bust first in multiple jurisdictions and ask questions later, leaving the ultimate decision to a jury. Distributors could be indicted in multiple states at once and stores repeatedly raided. Eventually, some either went out of business or became increasingly leery of taking on anything that even seemed slightly “adult,” whether it was *Playboy* or *Hustler* or *Weirdo*—it didn’t matter. In January 1988, the Friendly Frank’s manager was found guilty of obscenity and fined $750 and given a year’s probation. Eventually, businesses organized and filed suit against this persecution. In 1993, the Tenth US Circuit Court of Appeals called the prosecutorial strategy “a persistent and widespread campaign to coerce” individuals “into surrendering their First Amendment rights.” But the damage was done, and continued.

In response, Robert found a balance between social satire and sexual fantasies. The goal was not reconciliation but dialogue. He was still publishing some of his best work in *Weirdo*. Peter Bagge had edited it from issue 10 through issue 17, when he began drawing his own solo comic book, *Neat Stuff*. Aline took over as editor from issues 18 to 24, and 26 to the final issue, 28, in 1993. Her issues brought together the numerous female cartoonists making some of the strongest comics around, including Montreal-based Julie Doucet's surreal grotesqueries of female genitalia, Diane Noomin's ongoing explorations of feminism and sex, and Mary Fleener's carnivalesque tales of Southern Californian hedonism. Aline was also publishing a new friend, Carol Tyler, who, with her husband, Justin Green, lived in nearby Sacramento. Aline was always available for a chat, and coached Tyler on matters of family and work ("One kid plus comics is enough!"), while Robert offered a symbol of humility and an unfussy, sit-down-and-draw work ethic. Tyler's nonfiction stories grew over time into a sprawling body of work about twentieth-and-twenty-first-century parenting, labor, illness, and grief.

Aline's editorship produced the strongest issues of the magazine in part because she wasn't interested in the "comics world." She responded only to good stories, without concern for lineage or even her audience. As much as Robert wanted to get away from it, he was a product of comics fandom and so was Bagge. Aline's priority was simply to offer a forum for artists who were pursuing honest and risky expression within the medium. It was all about expression. In addition to his work for *Weirdo*, Robert published four issues of a new comic book entitled *Hup* with Last Gasp between 1987 and 1991, once again engaging with the format he loved most.

Hup was part of a wave of in the mid to late 1980s. There were graphic novels being published by mainstream publishers and finding larger audiences, most notably Art Spiegelman's enormously influential graphic novel *Maus*, released by Pantheon; the underground was also being collected in book form, including a Doubleday edition of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* with a cover by Robert, and Simon & Schuster's Fireside imprint published a twentieth-anniversary edition of *Head Comix*. Alongside these books, new cartoonists were still emerging in comic books, many of them taking permission from Robert's relentless self-examination as well as his career longevity. In 1989, Daniel Clowes, whose teenage discovery of Crumb opened his mind to personal comics, began publishing his one-man anthology title, *Eightball*, in which he explored the media, sexuality, nostalgia, psychology, and art in both fictional and essayistic modes. For Clowes, Robert represented the idea of comics as a vocation. After a couple of issues of *Hup*, he wrote to Robert: "It's really inspiring to see your current work and to see that you are still improving as a cartoonist and that drawing comics for no money still has its appeal. The only thing in the world I care about doing (career-wise) is drawing comics and I worry that some day I'll get burned out or starve to death or atrophy artistically due to lack of interest by others in my work but when I look around and see that there are still a few guys like you & Deitch & Spain who are continuing to improve after 25 years it gives me some hope." The following year, Julie Doucet began publishing the comic book *Dirty Plotte*, a one-person anthology that focused on herself as a character moving through dreamscapes, fantasies, and autobiography, each interchangeable with the others.

And like the underground generation, these Generation X cartoonists became intertwined with their generation's media, in this case the late 1980s and 1990s "alternative culture" now epitomized by bands like Sonic Youth, but then very much a handmade network of bands, artists, stores, magazines, and labels supporting one another. By the early nineties, the late and lamented chain Tower Records was carrying leading alternative comics in their flagship stores, making a place for yet more books of comics, including the 1991 release of *Twisted Sisters: A Collection of Bad Girl Art*, edited by Diane Noomin and published by Penguin. With blurbs from Madonna, Kathy Acker, and Robert himself, the book is a landmark for the medium, bringing together many of the best cartoonists of the time, all of whom were women: Aline, Doucet, Tyler, and Phoebe Gloeckner, among others. It was a clear signal that the medium was wide open, that the underground had, in a sense, provided a foundation for the expansion of comics to include all kinds of voices, ideas, and styles.

All of this offered some context for comics, with Robert often endorsing the best of it and welcoming young cartoonists into the fold with encouraging (or at the very least curious) postcards and letters. At the ripe old age of fifty he was becoming the grand old man of the medium. But he would never become its spokesperson. Aside from being misanthropic and ruthlessly honest, his presentation of himself as either a creep or a guy trying to shake off the sixties didn't help. Other cartoonists, not least Art Spiegelman and Lynda Barry, were naturally more sociable, and more likable. Barry, along with Harvey Pekar, became an occasional guest on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Along with a couple other cartoonists, this unlikely trio became the de facto spokespeople for adult comics. Robert leaned into his own abject sense of himself in *Hup*, each issue of which is introduced by a dialogue with "Stan Shnooter," a mash-up of Marvel Comics impresarios Stan Lee and Jim Shooter, a prototypical open-shirted, elaborately coiffed huckster of the time. The series alternated between topical vignettes, masturbatory sex fantasies, and philosophical explorations, all drawn with great care in his peak form.

For *Hup* 3, in 1989, he drew "Point the Finger," in which Robert, in a Johnny Carson–like talk show format, presciently lambastes "one of the most evil men alive": Donald Trump. Trump is dragged onto the stage/comic by two strong women and held in place while Robert paces back and forth ranting about the eviction notices and the greed. By page 3, Donald has successfully turned his audience against his negative, no-fun interlocutor. By the following page, Donald has left with the women and Robert is being arrested. Here, Stan Shnooter emerges to tell the cartoonist to tack on a different ending. In this one, the girls aren't impressed, and instead they dunk Trump's head in the toilet and then eagerly submit to Robert's sexual fantasies. Robert pops up to say, "And isn't this a nutty kinda country where you can draw any irreverent, degrading thing you want about th' most powerful people and nobody cares! You don't get jailed, you're not persecuted… they just ice you out of th' market place."

Robert's depiction of Trump's ability to sell and divide was sadly prescient. He'd skimmed *The Art of the Deal* and watched with disgust as the con man increased his shameless self-promotion throughout the 1980s by preying on the less fortunate. Both endings work—the first, Robert notes in the comic, is more realistic, and the second perhaps more hopeful, if predictive and paranoid about so-called cancel culture (it turns out the market is capacious enough for everyone). Robert later observed, "[Trump] was the embodiment of everything that went wrong in the eighties because he had no shame. He made no pretenses about it. That's the most bewildering part of all actually is the people who admired him for that."

Hup also explored Robert's philosophical interests. He has said that the layers of insulation between him and the existential question "What is this?" are so thin as to be porous. He distracts himself with records, art, and sex, but he can quickly get to the place that his comics often confront: What the hell *is* this? What is going *on*? *Why* are we here? In addition to examining these questions in essayistic comics, he began working through the source material itself: Robert's nine-page abridged excerpt from

Sartre's *Nausea* focuses on a café encounter between Sartre's stand-in, Antoine Roquentin, and "the self-taught man." Robert's panel borders are shaky and his interior perspective ever-changing to reflect the wooziness of revelation as Roquentin, in Crumb's visualization, perceives the emptiness of the objects and people around him. In each dark panel, 1930s faces lurch into view, their every blemish alight.

After nearly a decade, Mr. Natural also returned to once again ponder ontology and epistemology and, working overtime, as a guide to Robert's sex fantasies. In the first issue of *Hup*, Mr. Natural appears at Flakey Foont's door, though his protégé berates him as "another sixties burn-out street-crazy" and shoves him out. Nevertheless, Mr. Natural persists to bring Foont to his car and introduce him to "Devil Girl," an obnoxious, loudmouthed force to be reckoned with. Foont is mesmerized by Devil Girl's kinetic movements to the point of orgasm. The next issue included "The Meeting," in which Mr. Natural hypnotizes Devil Girl and she and Foont have violent, unhinged sex. The final issue of *Hup* ended the saga with "A Bitchin' Bod," in which Devil Girl initially appears without a head. This was inspired by a dream Robert had in which someone came to his door and presented him with "a living headless woman, a big tall woman I'd known in real life who had a magnificent Amazon body but a very irritating personality." He made some pencil story notes but felt it was too "sick" to complete and tossed them in the trash. When Robert told Aline about the dream and the discarded notes, she told him he needed to do it. So he did. In "A Bitchin' Bod," Mr. Natural has stuffed Devil Girl's head down into her body and put a cap on her neck. He invites Foont to pose and play with her. Finally, when it becomes too bizarre even for Foont, he insists they pull her head back up. She awakens, realizes Mr. Natural has treated her like a "piece of meat," and goes into a rage as Mr. Natural jumps out the window.

These strips are Robert at his most vile, but also, oddly vulnerable. He was stuck between shame and desire; the spiritual and material; worship and hatred. They are also curiously devotional, drawn with great care and attention, as though Robert was mesmerized by his own fantasy. One of the reasons it is alarming is that the cartooning has the ease of a John Stanley story, so we read Devil Girl's debasement as smoothly as we might a Little Lulu adventure. As he wrote at the time, "The thrill is obviously in exact measure to the misery and anxiety caused by such desires… I am hooked, addicted to my own sexual fantasies, desires, fixations… It's not a matter of choice… I'm helpless before them… They overtake me… Efforts to resist them have proven futile… I don't want freedom from them. I want to satisfy them…" Devil Girl for a while became such a fixation that he collaborated with a local woodcarver to make a life-sized sculpture strong enough for her creator to straddle. It is a radical position—to live your dreams, to draw them precisely as you see them. And for all his shame about the content and the exposure, Robert is competitive: he wants to show the world what he can do. It was also his job to make a living through his art. *Hup* sold well for years and earned him thousands of dollars. If he was compelled to draw comics like "Bitchin' Bod," he couldn't leave them unpublished. That was time spent, and time in those days was money. He needed to fill up a comic book, sell the comic book, sell the original art, and keep going.

Some were concerned that Robert's work in this vein could influence or spark violence. Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Aline said, "Anyone who takes that stuff literally is an idiot. He's acting out his fantasies. I think lots of women have masochistic fantasies, and that doesn't mean that they want to be raped." Aline is echoing various ideas that were grouped under "pro-sex feminism," which can in turn be linked to Ellen Willis's writings of the 1970s and '80s, in which she contended that consenting partners have a right to engage in whatever kind of sex they wish free of moral judgment. Allowing men and women the agency of their own fantasies is part of giving them agency over their social and biological urges, she argued. Legislating fantasy means proscribing how gendered people should *be* in the world.

There is a segment of his audience that, as Aline says, are idiots. They do take it seriously. You can see this all over the internet—men (and only men) posting a panel and cheering him on, hooting at the bodies, seconding his fantasies. This is the baggage that comes with working in a mass medium. The other baggage came from closer to home: In 1989, the principal at Sophie's school asked a friend of Aline's, "How can you be friends with the wife of a child pornographer?" A local pastor denounced Robert and Aline to his congregation as "agents of the devil." Many of the children stopped attending the art classes Aline taught at the school; Aline had worked hard to build a community in Winters, but the larger cultural forces seemed like they were conspiring against her, and it was too small a place to simply retreat. She said, "I was so disgusted in California about everything and the whole political situation. I also saw my friends' kids when they became teenagers there, they just wanted to hang out in shopping malls. I had to get Sophie out of there. So I decided to leave and have an art adventure. We could do it. Nobody else could. They all had jobs in Davis; we didn't. So I thought, 'Let's go somewhere else and have an adventure. If we don't like it we'll do something else. We're not going to stay here anyway.' Sophie could not continue on in the school system there at that time."

Aline and Sophie had spent six weeks in Paris in the summer of 1988, and by the end of it, Aline was certain that she at least wanted to try living in France for a spell. She had become a self-described Francophile. Cities were out of the question for them, so she considered a more liberal rural town. Aline returned the summer of

1989 and visited friends in Sauve, a small medieval village in the Cevennes region of southern France. The region itself is filled with old leftists who fled Paris in the wake of the May 1968 protests, as well as privacy-seeking expatriates. It feels Mediterranean in its crisp light, languid pace, and hot summers. The village itself dates back to around the ninth century and was, in the Middle Ages, a place of wealth and prestige. It is bounded on one side by the Vidourle River and on the other by the Mer des Rochers, miles of rocky hills called by the peasants of old "the Devil's Garden." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it fostered a silk industry—houses often had a little silkworm incubation area in them. It has two primary village squares linked by a web of narrow winding stone streets, a typical pre-automobile village. In 1990, Robert says, Sauve "was in bad shape. It was half-deserted. There was a criminal element there as well. You could hide there. There were also kind of subnormal remnants of peasant families that could never afford to get out of the old, dark, damp village and live in one of those nice 'villas' across the river where the sun shines in the afternoon and you can have a garden."

In June of 1990 the family flew to France for the summer and made their way to Sauve. They went to look at a row house in the village that they'd been told was a ruin; it turned out to be a three-level, thirteen-room home built into the village wall overlooking the river. It's an inviting pile, with levels built in the fifteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth centuries. The exterior was redone at some point to resemble an early-twentieth-century Parisian-style bourgeois façade. Aline made an offer on the spot; the owner, Mademoiselle Rigal, a woman in her seventies, seemed offended, but called back later to tell Aline, "Maman accepts your offer." Her mother was in her nineties, and the mademoiselle had never married. After a few days, Aline realized that she'd visited the wrong place. It was different than described because it was, in fact, a different house. The family had been thinking of selling it anyway, and, as she wrote, "when a family of rich extraterrestrials suddenly showed up at the front door as Mademoiselle Rigal was emptying a bucket of dirty water, she took it as a sign from God that it was time to sell." The house hadn't been occupied in a decade but was in good order. Robert arranged to sell six sketchbooks to a collector in Paris for about $100,000 and used that money to pay for the house and some necessary repairs.

It happened in a tornado of activity. Aline was at her best when running logistics. Packing and moving from Winters was chronicled on film by Terry. Jesse Crumb was there in the end, now twenty-three, working for weed growers in Mendocino County and developing his own art. He helped Robert pack up eighty-eight boxes of records, and not a single disc was broken in transit. Robert and Aline promised to fly him over soon enough. In April 1991 they had a farewell party in Davis and then flew to New York to see Aline's mother and stepfather. Then it was on to Paris, where Aline bought a small French car to drive on to Sauve. For the cover of their new two-person comic book, *Self-Loathing Comics* number 1, Aline drew herself clutching a Crumb-faced "golden goose" in one hand and Sophie in the other as she strides across continents. That first winter in the house, which lacked proper heating, was cold and unhappy. They camped out with a space heater in what would be Robert's studio. He broke his front tooth bridge on a baguette; a flowerpot fell on and dented the roof of a neighbor's car; unused to slippery stone stairs, Aline and Robert both fell on their backs in the first few months in their new house. It was an inauspicious beginning. And then in the chilly depths of the season, on February 16, 1992, Robert received a call from Bea:

"Hello?"

"Hello, Robert? Is that you?"

"Yes… Mother, is that you?"

“Yes… Charles is dead.”

Charles had swallowed a bottle of his medication and spent nine days in a coma in a Philadelphia hospital. Robert remembers: “I didn’t have any kind of grieving period. I grieved so long for him when he was alive, in a way it was kind of a relief when he finally did it… he’d been talking calmly about ending his own life for many years… I had a dream within the first six months after he died. It was one of those very vivid kind of dreams, and very short. I was there in some place with all these people wearing white robes, talking to each other. They seemed very wise and peaceful and all that. And one of these beings was him in his most handsome self, and he just turned and smiled at me to convey this message that everything’s fine and it’s good here.”

Robert has always known he could have shared Charles’s fate. Charles gave him a way to get through life and then just withdrew. Robert went public with the skills his brother drilled into him. Ultimately Robert had the ambition, the need to be seen and reckoned with, that Charles did not. Charles stayed behind. Robert went out into the world and tempted fate.

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PART V

1992–2024

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CHAPTER 22

Bonjour, Crumbs

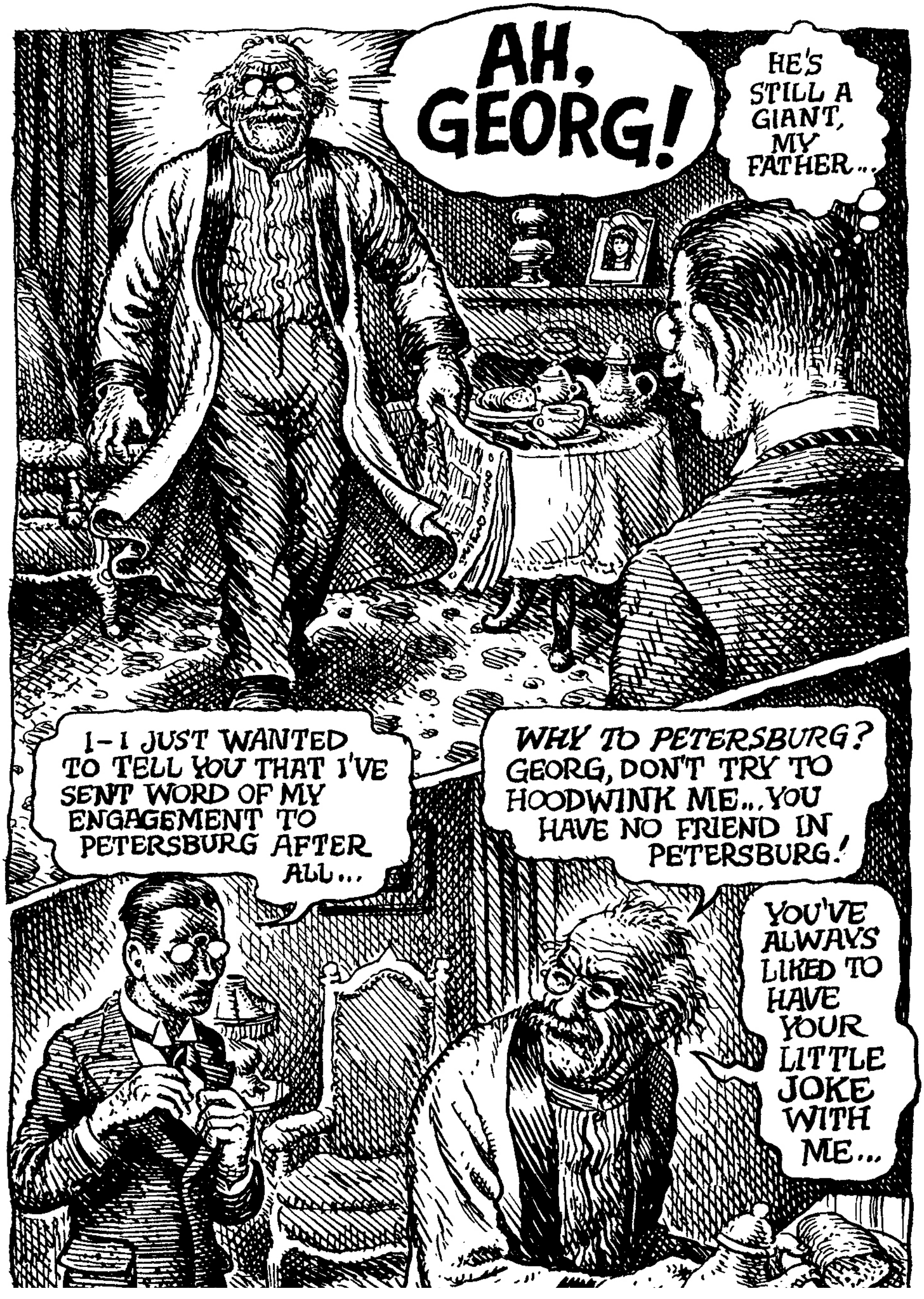
Settled into a tiny village in the South of France, Aline set about ingratiating the family with the local village. She learned the language, taught free yoga classes for twenty years, and both artists drew posters and flyers for anyone who asked. Sophie attended the local school, swiftly became fluent in French, and found her footing in the area. Robert explored his new environment, working outside as a way of introducing himself to his new neighbors. He produced finely detailed drawings for an eight-print portfolio released as *Vues de Sauve*. His dyslexia and general disinterest made it difficult for him to learn French. So he sat mutely at meals, drawing on the paper placemats that are a fixture of cafés and bistros. These drawings were a kind of de facto public sketchbook, as his private sketching began to wind down. There are finely observed images here—dining companions, passersby, snippets of English conversations, and some fine drawings of extraterrestrials—sheets Robert would complete during the course of a meal and which were published in four volumes under the title *Waiting for Food*.

Aline made the house a maximalist, color-saturated, and welcoming home. As in Winters, the furniture was worn to comfort; photographs, paintings, drawings, and various devotional statuary decorated alcoves and shelves. Her collections of toy Yorkies, baby dolls, and funky ceramics lined shelves in various rooms. Aline set up her own studio and office on the third floor, and the kitchen, which opened out onto a terrace, was covered in her shrines, artwork, and flowers. Robert's studio on the second floor was ringed by shelving units filled with 78s categorized geographically from Albania to Wales with subsections for countries, like Greece, with especially rich regional sounds. Resting on top of the cases were Robert's carefully arranged artifacts—toys, instruments, novelties, each chosen and placed with care. When the studio needed dusting, Aline would photograph the tableau so Robert could replace it just as it was. In one corner was the record player and speaker, to which Robert listened, eyes closed, in one of the chairs that made up the seating area in the middle of the room. An enormous 1920s wardrobe held Robert's files and archives, organized by correspondent, subject matter, and publisher. Robert worked in the furthermost corner from the door; his old desk from Winters, holding correspondence and supplies, was perpendicular to his tilted gray metal light table covered with a hard glass surface for drawing.

The house in Sauve, and the availability of other, smaller properties in the village, offered possibilities for friends and family to come and remake their lives as well. Robert and Aline brought Jesse and his future wife, Erica, to Sauve in 1993 and installed them in a two-room house they'd bought in the upper part of the village. Jesse helped Robert with coloring and other production work and made his own art as well. Robert had tried to help him from afar, but to no good end. He'd worked as a guard for one of the innumerable marijuana growers in Mendocino and struggled with drugs for his entire adult life. Sometimes he would try to flex influence as the son of Crumb to get jobs or status. He flashed a pistol when a Last Gasp employee told him he was blocking the driveway. Out of desperation and genuine fear that he'd be killed in a drug-related debacle, Robert called Denis Kitchen and asked him to give Jesse a beginner-level job. Jesse and his partner, Erica, moved across the country to Wisconsin to work for Kitchen Sink; it was a disaster. He wasn't used to office life, could be high-handed, and eventually physically threatened his colleagues. Working in Sauve wasn't much better.

They lasted about nine months, but his anger at Robert, and especially Aline, was overwhelming. By the end of 1994 he and Erica were back in Eureka, California.

Fixing up their home and increasing their footprint in the village meant Robert needed to take on some commissions. In 1992, Robert agreed to take on a job for the writer David Zane Mairowitz to illustrate his *Kafka for Beginners* (now called *Kafka*), which was packaged by a British company called Icon as part of a briefly popular series of *For Beginners* books. The pay was $10,000, and Robert needed it. He also happened to think Kafka was a very funny writer. Robert is forever interested in Jews. Aline, Kurtzman, Dana, Terry, Albert Morse—all these impactful people in his life—all Jews. Until he was an adult, Jews only existed as the makers of the culture he loved and maintained a mystique—a unique place in history, outsiders forever perceived as insiders.


AH, GEORG!
HE'S STILL A GIANT, MY FATHER...
I-I JUST WANTED TO TELL YOU THAT I'VE SENT WORD OF MY ENGAGEMENT TO PETERSBURG AFTER ALL...
WHY TO PETERSBURG? GEORG, DON'T TRY TO HOODWINK ME... YOU HAVE NO FRIEND IN PETERSBURG!
YOU'VE ALWAYS LIKED TO HAVE YOUR LITTLE JOKE WITH ME...

"The Judgement," *Kafka* 1993

In *Kafka*, Robert could explore Jewish psychology and history through a writer who contemplated the status of the outsider to family, society, and himself. He felt a kinship with the writer. Mairowitz wrote the text—a biographical section and then a gloss on Kafka's most beloved stories. Working with a crow quill on graph paper not much larger than the final publication size, Robert found a method that was somewhat loose and expressive to achieve light effects and dramatic staging. His image of the ritual murder libel has all the heightened angularity and contrast of a 1940s pulp terror comic book. Early 1900s Prague and its inhabitants are drawn faithfully from photographs but feel as alive as passersby in Sauve—he keeps the panels relatively small, so that just a doorway or a sign will appear, as opposed to an entire building. He's at his best in seemingly ordinary scenes of psychological anxiety, as when, in "The Judgment," Georg encounters his father, "still a giant," as the old man, his body bursting with hatch lines as if inflated, his eyes behind unimpeachable white spectacles. But when he casts judgment, his eyes are open, his mouth gaping, an aura of white around him, his finger deep in the foreground. We feel the biblical power of the father, revealed in his eyes and in his awesome outstretched hand.

It's a strange book—the typography around the drawings tends to distract, and the mix of retellings and biography never gels into a coherent narrative. Robert, as usual, underestimated the amount of work involved in the project—it took nine months to complete—but feels it's some of his best work.

* * *

After the Crumbs left America, Robert would return annually for about six weeks at a time to see friends, visit with Jesse and Erica, collect records, and hide out with Carol Vinson, who had since moved to Ashland, Oregon, where she worked for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Pent up in a country that never felt like home, in a small village, with a very social wife and an active kid, he needed his time alone. He's always needed sustained time and space to sort himself out, to understand who he is. In the sixties that meant fleeing; in the seventies, that meant bouncing from one place to another. And then in the nineties, it was a need for bigger space, to reconnect with the land that made him. "Moving to France," Robert says, "made me realize that I am deeply American, alienation notwithstanding, much more deeply than Aline. After all, the Crumbs came to America before it was the United States, when it was still ruled by the English!" So, Aline would book the air travel and Robert would always come back. She would joke that she knew he would come back to Sauve because that's where the records were, but it was for her and Sophie. He would always come back for them. His visits were flurries of activity—one year he made a tally in a sketchbook, counting ninety-six social encounters (including every single transaction) in a fifteen-day span—usually ending with a retreat to Vinson's home.

She always lived in humble circumstances: in the attic of her cousin's modest bungalow, or in a studio apartment above a garage. Robert wrote of their time together, "[It's a] vacation from my normal life. We'll go hole up in some remote auto-court and take long walks in the woods… having that escape, just knowing it's there for me, helps keep me sane… not to mention her invincible amazing body, and how the big former hockey player likes to show off how strong and flexible she is… Carol doesn't have any illusions about this, and knows I won't leave Aline…" He later wrote, "Her motto in life was 'keep your head down and your feet moving'… I think I *have* been in love with Carol Vinson for a long time. I am also deeply in love with my wife Aline. Or at least I harbor deep feelings of fondness for both of these women. It has caused me some difficulty, yes. It's touchy, sometimes, juggling this situation. They each have qualities that the other doesn't have, they each have vexatious character traits also. But I could probably handle having both of them in the same town, close at hand, if *they* could handle it, but they couldn't. Sometimes I think I'd like to *take care* of Carol so that she didn't have to keep her miserable job but she wouldn't hear of me supporting her. She likes her independence, as hard as it is for her."

In the midnineties, Vinson began visiting Paris, where the Crumbs had an apartment. They would stroll around the city and flirt a bit; she gave him a piggyback ride one afternoon in Père Lachaise Cemetery, to the shock of some other visitors. Sometimes they saw Sophie together, who remarked that really Vinson would have been better suited to Robert as a wife than Aline. But this was just because of their mutual shy, retiring sensibilities. Together, they wouldn't have been able to navigate the world. Robert needed Aline, needed that push, that social competence, maybe even her borscht belt sensibility, to help him laugh through the pain.

Being away, and being with Vinson, in some ways increased the dialogue between his sense of disgust and his sense of awe. During his first trip back in 1992, he looked at the country anew. "When I was in America," he said, "I was shocked that all the stuff I'd thought would be over with by now—racism, sexism—wasn't finished. It's still there, only people are not so overtly sexist or racist. They just hide it under that bogus politically correct stuff." Processing his homeland from afar, he also knew that the racial inequality of the 1980s was being exacerbated. He had two thoughts: First, that these attitudes were getting worse, not better. And second, that these attitudes were in him and all his liberal friends. They are a part of growing up in America. Back in Sauve, with the distance of an expatriate, he unleashed his final and most damning vision of the place in the two-part comic strip "When the Niggers Take Over America" and "When the Goddamn Jews Take Over America," published in the 1994 final issue of *Weirdo*, number 28, once more edited by Aline. In "When the Niggers…," Robert has Black men invading white suburbia, killing the men and raping the women, eventually enslaving all white people without mercy. "When the Goddamn Jews…" has the Jewish people undermining Christian culture through the media and psychoanalysis. The final page reminds readers of all the other "scumbag elements"—Italians, Latinos, Asians. And in the final four panels, the only power left to the Anglo-Saxons is the power to bring about the apocalypse, nuclear annihilation.

Robert took a lot of heat for this comic. His friends Art Spiegelman and Bill Griffith said it didn't work as satire, which it doesn't. It works as a well-observed warning about the racism and antisemitism embedded in America, masked as cathartic art. For the writer Ishmael Reed, this was Crumb at his best, manifesting the unspoken core idea among liberals and conservatives alike: virile Black men are going to take the white women away and humiliate the white men. As Reed points out, this core fear has been in circulation for hundreds of years, and in 1978 was given literary form in the book *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce, itself practically a manual for the last forty years of white nationalism. This, the dredging of a widely circulating but unspoken fear, the showing of it, is a different act than Angelfood McSpade, with its strange and undercooked mix of fetish and critique. Robert knew he'd hit a nerve when *Race & Reality*, a white-power newsletter published in Massachusetts, bootlegged "When the Jews…" in its pages and used Robert's name as a way to legitimize their views, as if to say that the king of the hippies was now on their side, prompting coverage in the *New Yorker*, and Robert's musings that the appropriation "showed how far out in the twilight zone those paranoid characters are! That kind of extreme racial phobia is all about fear and paranoia of a severe and pathological kind." He never could have done it if he had still been living in America—he would have been too close to it. Publishing that comic in 1994 was the artistic equivalent of walking around the brick wall to take yet another rock in the teeth. In this case, he risked being cast out as a racist and an antisemite so he could prove just how far gone America was.

* * *

That same year, 1994, Terry's film *Crumb* premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, and won best cinematography and the Grand Jury Prize for best documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in 1995. Siskel and Ebert gave it a rave two months before it was even released. Made for around $300,000, it grossed $3.4 million at the box office. For many, it was the first they'd heard of Robert Crumb since the sixties and was a hit on a scale no one predicted. It won every major award for documentary films in 1995, and over one hundred film critics called it one of the ten best films of the year. The film itself remains one of the best portraits of an artist in any medium. Robert, safely ensconced in France, never thought it would even be released.

If the BBC documentary is Crumb the ham and the attempted old-time entertainer, à la his *Weirdo* persona, *Crumb* is Terry's articulate and knowing vision of his old friend. Terry's eye for the grotesqueries of modern life, influenced by Robert's vision, was now trained on the Crumbs. He didn't flinch. Terry interviewed most of the old crew: Dana is wistful; Kathy is still hurt by Robert's matter-of-fact assessment of their relationship, which he would call "telling the truth"; and then there is poor, dead Charles, toothless and bloated yet startlingly charismatic. David Lynch, who agreed to add his name to the credits as "Presented by" in order to entice audiences, told Terry that he wanted Charles for his next film.

Robert and Aline watched *Crumb* on videotape in March 1995. Terry remembered, “I asked, ‘What did you think of it?’ And he said, ‘It was mortifying.’ I said, ‘Do you think it’s a bad film?’ And he said, ‘No, but I’m looking at myself in a mirror, so what am I supposed to say? Is it good? Is it bad? I just don’t want to look at it.’” Aline felt like it underplayed what was a remarkable marriage. “He said he didn’t want to really dwell on our happy marriage. Nobody really wants to see that. They want to see the weird Crumb family, the freak show.”

Terry asked Aline if she was worried about her mother seeing the film. “I said, ‘She’s not going to see a film unless it comes to the mall behind her house.’ And it did. But then all of her friends said, ‘You’ve got to see this film.’ Oh my God. She was so humiliated. Well, she called me up and she said, ‘I saw the film and I’m really hurt,’ and she hung up on me.” For all those years, Aline’s mother had never read her comics. She knew only that Robert was a little bit famous. The rest was lost to her in a haze of narcissism. Now her daughter was talking about her horrible childhood and strange husband in front of the whole world. “I didn’t know what to do, and she didn’t talk to me for a few months. Then she called me a few months later and she said, ‘All right, let’s never talk about it again. I’m over it.’ I said okay and we never talked about it again.”

Bea never saw the film, but an enterprising reporter for *Entertainment Weekly* got ahold of Carol, who, in her only recorded comments on the entire Crumb family, promptly attempted to debunk the narrative: “My brothers always tended to exaggerate. Our family was dysfunctional, but as I grew up I saw families as bad or worse. Like Charles talking about our mother being an amphetamine addict. My mother does have mental problems, but she only took diet pills for six months to lose weight. I don’t view that as being an addict. [Chuck] was a career marine. He believed in discipline and punished you when you disobeyed. He was tough.” Of Charles’s suicide: “An overdose. He’d made references to me a couple of times that he wouldn't live to be fifty. He'd laugh about it! Charles always tended to the dramatic. He just chose a dramatic exit." It is unknown if Sandra saw it. She refused any requests for interviews over the years and seldom kept in touch with the family, including her son. Sandra Crumb died in 1998 of colon cancer. She was fifty-one.

Robert and Aline were happy for the success of their friend but couldn't help feeling a little used by Terry and peeved at him for inadvertently thrusting Robert back into the mainstream limelight. But then, as Robert notes, "Even your best friends can't help themselves sometimes, to use their friendship with this famous person to their advantage, somehow. The only person who never did this was Carol Vinson."

The popularity of the film cranked a mini-Crumb industry into life once again. Denis Kitchen convinced Robert to publish *The R. Crumb Coffee Table Art Book*—an oversized monograph devoted to his life and work. Soon there was also *Crumb Comics: The Whole Family Is Crazy!*, which included work by the brothers, Aline, Sophie, and Jesse. There were *American Splendor* collections, a *Dirty Laundry* anthology, and endless prints, not to mention a Mr. Natural squeeze toy. Every request came from a friend, a family member, somebody whom he and Aline couldn't deny. It was easier to say yes and moan about it later. The business was good for his quality of life. They could travel back and forth to the States and provide for a teenage Sophie, go out to eat a few times a week during the warm months, and Robert could buy records as he wished. Every so often he would hire a tutor to learn French but never progressed much beyond the basics.

Some obligations, too, came with old pain. Jesse Crumb, twenty-six, having lived offstage in Eureka, California, was suddenly thrust into an unwelcome spotlight in one of the saddest and most revealing scenes in the documentary: Robert gives him tips on capturing likenesses in a drawing, and Jesse takes them, but then jabs his father about being rich and famous, which, Robert accurately says, has nothing to do with drawing. To him, Robert was a well-to-do absentee father who was present solely through his art and the money it provided. Worse yet, while he had some drawing ability, he couldn't shake his father's stylistic influence or his inherited depression and anxiety from both parents. As another way of offering support, in 1997 Robert granted him "all licensing and merchandising rights in all product categories throughout the world, for all characters and/or properties owned by me, pending individual product approval by me." Jesse partnered with an American printer named Alex Wood to produce silkscreens, comic books, and figurines.

Robert declined the biggest film tie-in offers: *Rolling Stone* wanted a six-page response to the film, and David Letterman asked him to be on *The Late Show*. His old friends began to worry he was getting too big for his britches. *Zap* was still limping along. Never Robert's favorite project, it was becoming a sore point. Rick Griffin died in a motorcycle crash in 1991, giving the project's founder and primary draw one less reason to participate. The following issue, number 13, appeared in 1994 as tribute to the fallen psychedelic hero, and, Robert hoped, might be a capstone. The other artists disagreed. In San Francisco in June of 1995, Robert got into an odd middle-aged kerfuffle with his fellow contributors. Ensconced in Terry Zwigoff's concrete basement having sex play with a visiting Carol Vinson, Robert forgot that he was due to work on a collaborative comic "jam" with Spain, Victor Moscoso, and S. Clay Wilson for issue 14.

After a few phone calls went unanswered, his old comrades showed up at the house to see what was going on. When they arrived, he emerged genuinely, unapologetically irritated. Carol stayed in the basement, telling Robert, "If you go with them, I won't be here when you get back." So he told them that he didn't want to draw together;

he was through with *Zap*, and he said so in a tone that Spain felt was "abrupt and snotty." At which point Moscoso either slapped or punched him in the arm and they split. These purveyors of outrage, the baddest ink slingers on the block, were all somehow wounded in this encounter, and as solid self-mythologizers, they turned "the Incident at Zwigoff's" into grist for the next issue, number 14, released in 1998, which detailed each artist's view of the encounter, each playing up the absurdity and creepiness of it all. Making an argument out of it, no matter how foolish looking, was one way to pull Robert back in. But underneath the absurdity, Spain was genuinely hurt. The two reconciled in an exchange of gentlemanly letters reminiscing about their long friendship in displays of sentimentality that they could only show one another. Robert offered for the others to continue without him, writing apologetically to Spain: "Believe me, this has nothing to do with fame or celebrity-hood. Quite the contrary… My main objection to *Zap* from the early issues has been its exclusivity… I was never attracted to this idea, was in actuality always vexed by it… Frustrated about it… alright sure, certainly the work in all the issues of *Zap* is most impressive… I greatly admire all the artists in *Zap*… Still, I never liked the closed shop policy and lost interest in the book because of it."

Detailing the scene at Terry's, Robert continued, "I guess it was a somewhat humiliating experience for you, to be sent on your way summarily like that… it was a bad scene… I'm not entirely to blame… you all assumed I could be 'bullied' and relied on that… but it just so happened that on that occasion there was a powerful counterforce at work, as shown in the strip I did about it—a woman with huge, wondrous legs waiting for me, all mine, down there in the basement… so that was it… I had to face the music… Moscoso's reaction was my worst nightmare—totally ruined my day… a real bummer… But having you be angry at me, you feeling betrayed or 'put in your place' is the worst thing to come out of all of this. I still consider you one of my best friends in the world.” The idea that he was suddenly seen by his friend as a snob was too painful for him—if nothing else, Robert wants to play rhythm in the background. His work always shines, but there can be no airs about it.

For all its problems, Spain felt that *Zap* was still worthwhile. He wrote, “We’re kind of an old white guy ‘establishment’ of underground comics. But in view of the mega-mergers of mega giants in recent years and the choke hold of monopolies on mass media it looks a little bit like ‘delusions of grandeur’ to think of ourselves as anything like an establishment. Another view is that maybe we are an elite unit that has weathered the storms of the ups and downs of the comic market, guys who have continued to crank it out when it seemed as if everyone had gone someplace else and guys who aren’t going down without a fight.” And so *Zap* continued for as long as, and just after, Spain was alive.

Robert and Aline, meanwhile, had the final word on their own fame and the film. Thanks to the recently appointed art editor of the *New Yorker, Raw*’s Françoise Mouly (Mouly first brought Robert into the *New Yorker* with a 1993 cover commission for which he reimagined its mascot, Eustace Tilley, as a slacker gazing at a “Live Nudes” flyer, walking in a sea of other aimless man-boys in backward baseball caps against the New York City skyline), they publicly responded to the film in the April 24, 1995, issue with “Head for the Hills! Trying to Escape the ‘R. Crumb Thing’ with Aline ’n’ Bob.” They drew themselves walking in the Mer des Rochers bemoaning their fate—theatrically imagining Terry as an evil puppet master while reaffirming their admiration of their friend. They fret over this latest exposure and the hucksters it’s sure to bring. Robert flings his old trademark fedora away and vows to change his appearance. He grew his hair longer, wore a flat cap, and exchanged his tweed jacket for a windbreaker. The disguise worked. In June of 1995, on the same visit to San Francisco as the *Zap* incident, Robert went alone to see *Crumb* at the Castro Theatre to see how it played on the big screen. Out in the lobby after the film, no one recognized the man they'd just gazed at on the screen; even a former girlfriend walked right past him.

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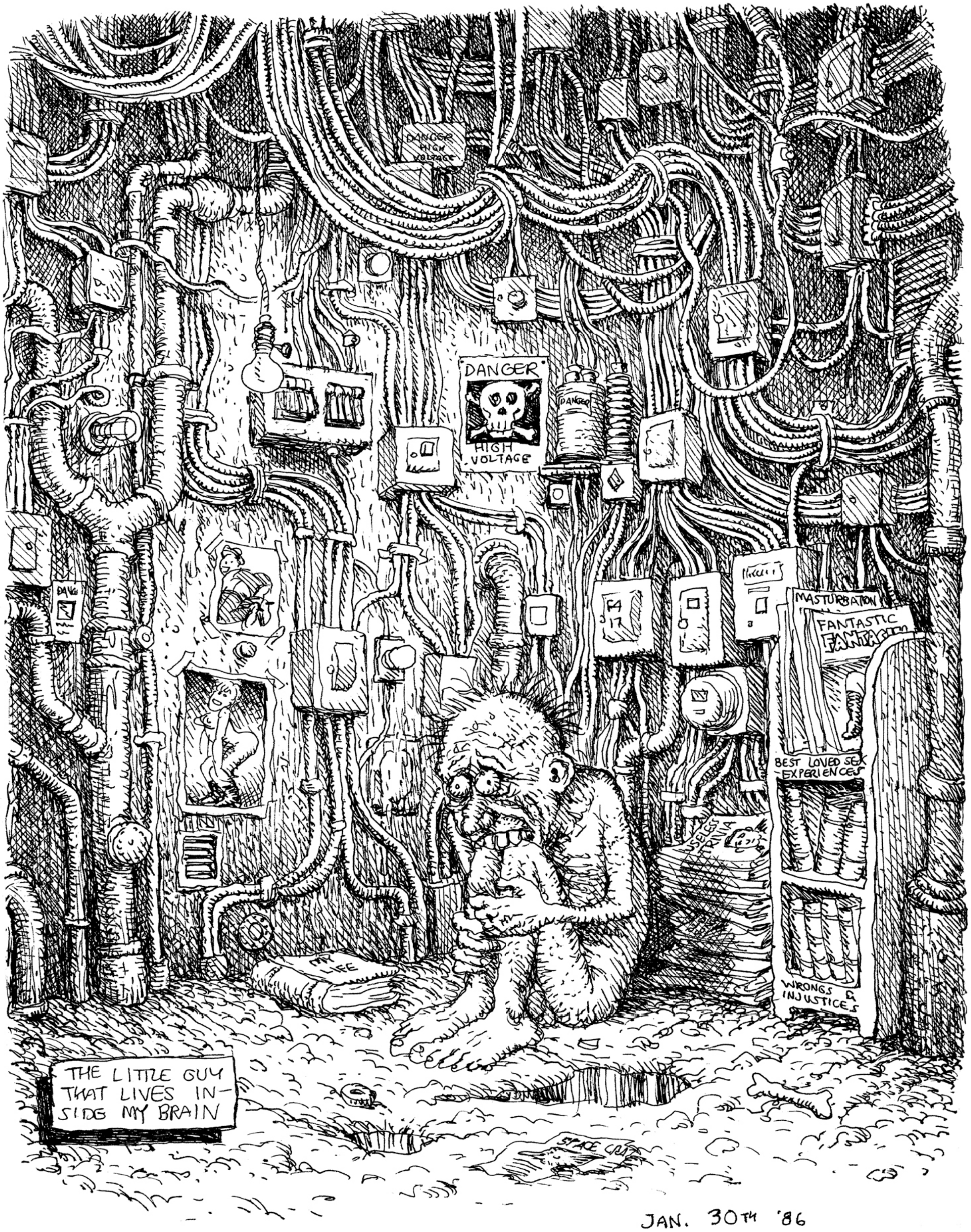
CHAPTER 23

Dealing with It

In the wake of the film, Robert retrenched himself. He began daily meditations in June of 1996. His approach remains a straightforward mindfulness: “Sit down in a chair, close your eyes, breathe, try and relax, you know. Relax and breathe—and go from there. You don’t have to chant or do anything, you know, just go from there. Sometimes you get drowsy, you know. There’s all kinds of approaches to it. But basically you don’t need anything except a will to do it and a place, a quiet place to do it. You need a quiet place. Everybody needs a quiet place.” He used to have to order himself to relax, to release the tension from his body and to breathe. Now meditation quieted his mind, made him less reactive, more tolerant, and kept his depression at bay. He also began a more dedicated physical regimen. A few times a week, in sandals, trousers, dress shirt, and cap, a small cloth bag slung across his torso, he would walk the zigzag cobblestone path up the hill, past houses and garden plots, out of the village and into the Mer des Rochers. He spent entire days clearing the ancient paths. He would cut through the brambles and overgrowth with shears and move the fallen rocks and small boulders out of the way. The paths occasionally ran into stone shepherd huts or passed by rocky overlooks, lush one moment, desolate the next. He would take Aline up there and watch with pleasure as she enjoyed the paths without getting snagged by thorny vines. He would often think of her while he was clearing, think how nice it would be for her. And he thought of others’ enjoyment. It was a way to perform an anonymous public service. Gratifying to him, but with no external reward. Part of this was soothing his ego; he also thought of it as paying off his karmic debt.

He continued playing with Dominique Cravic's band, Les Primitifs du Futur, touring with them throughout the nineties and into the 2000s. And while he was the visual voice of the band, supplying its album covers and posters, Robert, on banjo or mandolin, played a supporting role live and in the studio. He also continued his interest in musette, making another set of trading cards—this time of thirty-five musette accordionists and one saxophone player. This was both an immersion in French culture and—as with the Cheap Suits, with whom he happily reunited in 1995 and 1998 for brief European tours—a way to get out into the world and find a collective creative experience. He enjoyed those latter-day tours with the Suits—they played better than ever and Al Dodge took it upon himself to manage the autograph seekers. After each performance, he would stretch out his big arms and herd the people out, intoning, "Thank you for your support. Thank you for your support."

In his artistic life, he also needed to submerge his ego in a project. His sketchbooks, legendary to his peers and fans since the late 1960s and published on their own beginning with Terry Zwigoff and Kathy Goodell's comic book edition, *Artistic Comics*, were methodically released in multivolume sets both by his German and American publishers. These sketchbooks set a new course for other cartoonists, who were awed by both the casual brain-to-hand connection and the ever more elaborate finished drawings printed therein. It was an entire body of work alongside his comics. Drawings like 1986's "The Little Guy That Lives Inside My Brain"—a shriveled human inside a dank cavern of circuitry—were published alongside casually drawn comic strips, portraits, landscapes, memories of Philadelphia and San Francisco, and nearly everything else that passed through his mind. The sketchbooks bring out an entire sensibility, however it emerged. They are books of finished drawings: an artistic activity unto themselves. They, like *R. Crumb's Dream Diary* (published by Elara in 2018), demonstrate that Robert's unconscious is, in a sense, conscious. His private and public voices are identical; there is no division between the public and private self. The cumulative effect was that Robert felt like he had little left of his own. His "self" was wrung out. Gradually he felt too self-conscious to draw in his sketchbook, knowing it would be seen and evaluated. After the publication of *Dream Diary* he could no longer remember his dreams. His subconscious, he said, was rebelling against him: "It has its own agenda, and does not like being exposed. Not at all."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BEST LOVED SEX EXPERIENCES
USELESS TRIVIA
MY LIFE
WRONGS & INJUSTICES
SPACE CRA
THE LITTLE GUY THAT LIVES INSIDE MY BRAIN

JAN. 30TH '86

Sketchbook drawing, January 30, 1986.

And so, he tried to develop a distance in his work. A way to take the "Crumb" out of the equation and assume a devotional stance. This became *Art & Beauty Magazine*, which debuted from Kitchen Sink Press with the motto "To Uplift and Enlighten." He produced three issues between 1996 and 2016. In each, he pairs realistic black and white crow quill drawings with text of his own, words from friends, and quotes from artists as varied as Edward Hopper and Harvey Kurtzman. Robert describes this project as "ego-less," saying "I was putting my skills to use to promote the greater glory of the female form. It's a form of homage, of adoration."

Art & Beauty Magazine is based on publications from the 1920s, including *Arts Monthly Pictorial* (published by raconteur and photographer Edwin Bower Hesser), *Artist's Notebook*, and *Art & Life*, among other titles, that were erotic magazines disguised as art instruction. All featured sepia-toned, soft-focus photos of women, usually aspiring actresses and models, coyly posed as if just emerging from behind the ever-present drapes, or sometimes with a poetic grandeur, a nude basking in the moonlight. Because they were sold as educational magazines for art students, the magazines also included articles on classical figures, lettering, literature, and the written word in purple prose, grandiose in tone and sentiment, such as this text from Hesser in the September 1926 issue of *Arts Monthly Pictorial*: "Even if you are not one of the inner circle devoting their whole lives to art, try to look at these pictures only in the light of understanding and appreciation of the beauty given to the world by its Creator."

And thus, Robert, as ever, following his own muse, made his own version. The images themselves come from photographs, some of which Robert himself directed with the women in his life; occasional life drawings; photos taken by Aline (she had a good eye for the type of women Robert needed for the project and wasn't shy about snapping pictures in public); and plenty of images pulled from magazines and newspapers. All feature the women Robert loved most—strong, proud, fearless. He was to remain as faithful to the source as possible. His goal was to step out of being “R. Crumb” and serve this particular project. At their best, the drawings come alive because Robert is actively investigating the physical life of his subject through drawing. This can go awry when he’s lost in copying the photograph, rather than drawing its subject. A later drawing of Lady Gaga, for example, looks stiff in execution, rather than the work of an expressive pen. Robert is at his best when he’s, as he would say, “cheating” a bit, deviating from a photograph to shift an angle, accentuate a feature, and altogether bring his own point of view into the picture.

"ABSTRACT ART: A PRODUCT OF THE UNTALENTED SOLD BY THE UNPRINCIPLED TO THE UTTERLY BEWILDERED."

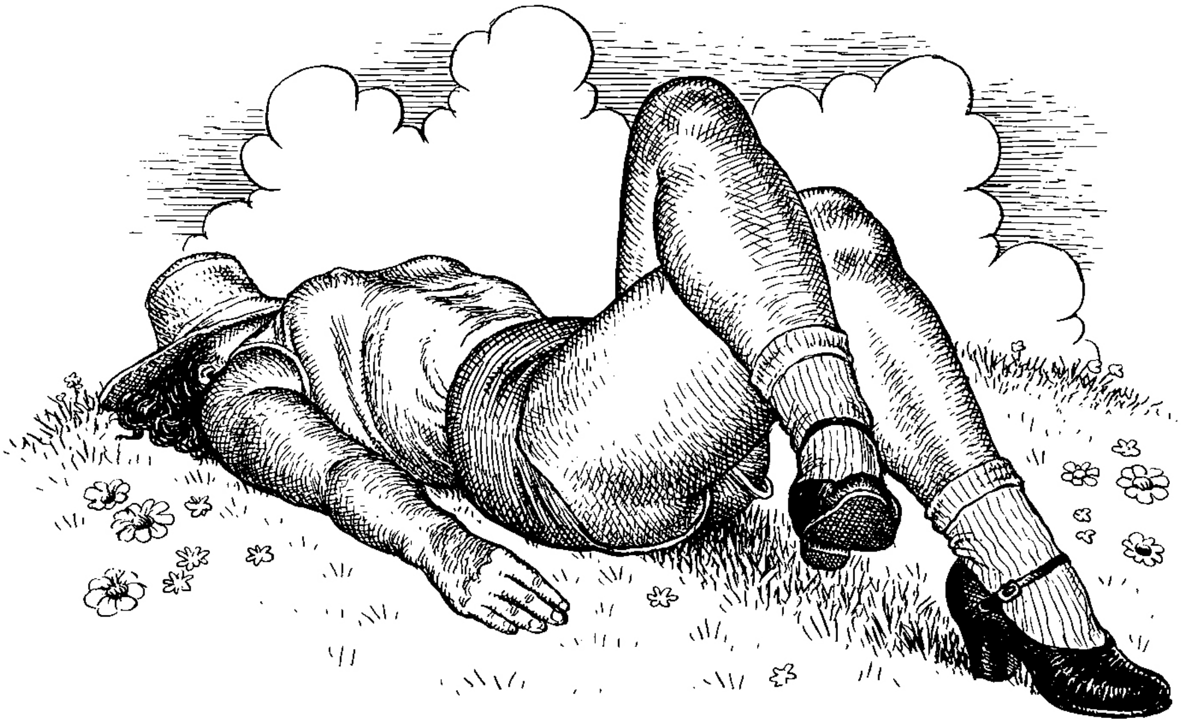
—AL CAPP, *creator of the popular comic strip "Li'l Abner"*

"MINIMAL ART IS MAXIMUM PROFIT."

—ISAMU NOGUCHI, *Minimalist sculptor*

"ART IS ANYTHING YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH."

—MARSHALL McCLUHAN



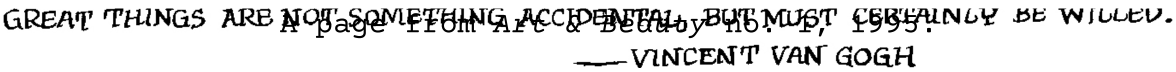
"SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS" or "CAUGHT NAPPING"

A SENSE OF SERENITY AND NATURAL SIMPLICITY PERVADES THIS SCENE. IN ADDITION, THE ARTIST HAS INFUSED WARMTH AND LIFE INTO HIS FINE PENWORK.

"IT'S THE DUTY OF EVERY WOMAN WHO HAS A GOOD FIGURE TO PRESERVE IT AS LONG AS THEY CAN, AND THEY SHOULD NOT WAIT UNTIL THEY GET FAT, FROWSY AND FORTY, BUT SHOULD TAKE SYSTEMATIC EXERCISES TO PRESERVE THE SINUOUSNESS OF THEIR MUSCLES ALL THEIR LIFE."

—RUBIE STEVENS *from an article, "Why Cabaret?" in* ARTISTS AND MODELS MAGAZINE, February, 1926

I BELIEVE THAT IT MAY HAPPEN THAT ONE WILL SUCCEED, AND ONE MUST NOT BEGIN TO DESPAIR, EVEN THOUGH DEFEATED HERE AND THERE; AND EVEN THOUGH ONE SOMETIMES FEELS A KIND OF DECAY, THOUGH THINGS GO DIFFERENTLY FROM THE EXPECTED, IT IS NECESSARY TO TAKE HEART AGAIN AND NEW COURAGE. FOR THE GREAT THINGS ARE NOT DONE BY IMPULSE BUT BY A SERIES OF SMALL THINGS BROUGHT TOGETHER. AND


GREAT THINGS ARE NOT SOMETHING ACCIDENTAL, BUT MUST CERTAINLY BE WILLED.
—VINCENT VAN GOGH

A page from *Art & Beauty* no. 1, 1995.

A special section of issue two is devoted to women and girls “into the most strenuous daring and fiercely competitive of the various sports and athletic contests,” drawing from photos of Serena Williams, among other female athletes whose public adoration Robert felt was a step forward toward a more open standard of beauty. All of the text and design elements are in Robert’s hands; much of the pleasure of the project is moving through his aesthetic world.

Having removed his ego from the project, where is Robert the artist in this work? “My sense of self in relation to history, to human society, to culture and music, and all that is all tied together. My sense of self is deeply involved in the past. I also had worked that way with musicians, adoration of great music. Just putting your skills to promote the greater glory of the female form or great music. With the comics, it was always somehow an expression of my inner angst and that’s not what’s going on in *Art and Beauty*. How much more do I need to say? How much more does an artist need to express?”

The answer wasn’t quite clear, but in an attempt to understand the question, and indeed, what his own consciousness might consist of, he began focusing on his own mental and spiritual well-being. His time in the Mer des Rochers certainly helped, but as he aged, there was an inner realm that needed probing. Having lived out his wildest sexual fantasies, he sought more ethereal challenges. In addition to his meditation practice, Robert also began attempting astral projection, the idea that with practice one’s consciousness could lift out of one’s body. He studied the writings of Robert Monroe and

William Buhlman, both of whom claimed to have successfully achieved projection, and described their individual practices.

The third floor of the house in Sauve was the quietest place in the home. Aline and Robert's bedroom was there, Aline's office, and a cavernous bathroom. On sunny days, a skylight illuminates the perimeters of each space. Several times a week for a few years, early in the morning before getting out of bed, or late at night before sleeping, Robert would attempt projection. He says he succeeded in leaving his body for ten or fifteen seconds at the most. The first time he did it, he decided to try waking up his friend Pete Poplaski, who was staying in a house nearby. He remembers, "I flew through a white fog, got to Pete's front door—thought for a moment, how do I get through this door? Then I just went through it and went to where Pete was sleeping and tried to wake him up by pinching him, but my astral fingers just went through his body without effect. Then I was pulled back into my body, back in bed at home. Later I told Pete about this experience. He remembered being agitated in his sleep, around 7:30 in the morning, as if something was trying to wake him up!"

Robert's practice was difficult to maintain. Because the material world is never far away, the family cats would interrupt him, meowing and scratching at the door or finding a way in to jump on him. Buhlman had the distinct advantage of living a quiet life with his mother, without a care in the world except the astral plane. Robert eventually let the practice go, achieving his last projection around 2005.

From Carlos Castaneda's 1960s and '70s novels about the teachings of a mysterious shaman, Robert also found a wider area in which to ground his instincts. The world was, as Robert intuited, an endless mystery to explore, but to do so effectively meant letting go of the ego and embracing a stance of adventurous unknowing every day. Time on earth is finite, so the search for knowledge of self and the universe (bound together by energy) was paramount. These texts, along with readings in and practicing astral projection, gave him an enlarged sense of the universe. He had for years now been visualizing his philosophical observations as display lettering—using different lettering modes to create a visual record of the words. "EVERYTHING WE DO HAS SIGNIFICANCE" is rendered in dimensional letters; "WHERE DO YOU FIT IN IN INFINITY" is swept into a whirlpool of humanity.

In the late 1990s his sketchbook filled up with drawings that metaphorically rendered ideas he speaks of with urgency: "We are beings of energy, just even on the electromagnetic scale. We have a magnetic field around us. And then of course there's a subtler level of energy, subatomic level around us. Castaneda used to say that we live inside an egg-shaped energy sphere around us. That makes complete sense to me. And then beyond that, who knows what that extends to? At some point I had visions of giant, powerful, all-encompassing, wise beings. I'm sure it's just a metaphor of existence being larger than us. God exists somewhere in the dimensions of reality. Anything that's possible probably does exist somewhere. And I'm sure there's powerful intelligences that are so far beyond us that we have no idea what kind of influence they might have on our reality. We have no idea. We don't know."

He wondered about these things with greater and greater urgency as his friends and family faded away. In the mid-1990s, Aline took Sophie to visit Bea. Without Charles, Bea had deteriorated further. Some of the acoustic tiles in the kitchen ceiling had been pulled down because Bea was certain that Chuck (who was dead) had bugged the house. "The shag carpet in the living room, which I thought was brown, I lifted up a throw rug, and it was actually pale blue," Aline said. "It was so disgusting. It was so incredible. She'd torn up the floorboards. She'd stripped the edge off the TV screen, because she thought there was wiring around it. And it smelled like an animal cage. The cats shit on the shag carpet. We slept upstairs there one night and it was the most horrible night ever. I just held Sophie up against me in the bed, it was so scary in there."

Bea's daughter Carol offered to move her down to the small Maryland town where she lived, but she refused. She wouldn't take help from anyone. In 1996, having declined all assistance, she was declared a ward of the state and taken to Fair Acres Geriatric Center. Robert wrote to inform Maxon: "Well, Geeble, tomorrow they're going to take her away… She raised us, fed us, clothed us, made our beds, bought us Christmas and birthday presents every year, drove us to and from school, looked after us when we were sick… She had names of endearment for us… I was 'Louie.' You were 'Heart.' Yes, she was crazy… Things went from bad to worse. Now her mind is going fast, her memory function is failing, deteriorating day by day… All she has left to live for is her cats." The house was sold, and some $40,000 was used to pay her outstanding debts (she'd failed to pay property taxes over the years, among other bills), with the rest going toward her care at Fair Acres.

In his letter to Maxon, Robert's vision of death, which would continue visiting him, was quite clear: "So it goes… another human tragedy. So much of human life ends in tragedy. Why y' s'pose that is, Maxon?? What the hell's going on? What is God up to?? When someone you've been close to goes into a long, slow decline, as Charles did, as Marty Pahls did, as our mother has been doing, I think one's heart is affected slowly, gradually… One's sorrow happens a little bit at a time over the years, the decades. By the time something drastic happens, like this now with Mother, it's almost a relief… The dramatic culmination, a tragic probability you've been expecting for so long, after all those frustrating years in which you watched the grim progression of their deterioration, watched them go from bad to worse, their death, or Mother being institutionalized is just a kind of finality, a decisive finish to their self-destruction."

Robert visited Bea at Fair Acres once, two months before she died. She was drugged and in a secure ward because she'd punched a nurse in the mouth.

In May 1997 Robert spent the night in a roofless hut in the Mer des Rochers. He dreamed of his mother shrinking into the abyss, flickering away from him. When he awoke and returned home there was a message waiting for him. His mother had died while he slept.

A gentler tone permeates the first issue of his next stack of comic books, the three-issue series *Mystic Funnies*, which acts as an ethereal parallel to the materialist *Art & Beauty*, a place in which to make comics informed by his spiritual questing. After sidelining Mr. Natural as a washed-up old sex pest in *Hup*, Robert brought him back to interrogate the nature of consciousness and reality in *Mystic Funnies* 1, published in 1997 by Jesse Crumb and Alex Wood into the continuing boom in independent comic books across North America. Comic book stores stocked titles by Peter Bagge, Daniel Clowes, Debbie Drechsler, Mary Fleener, Roberta Gregory, the Hernandez brothers, Joe Matt, Seth, and numerous cartoonists aiming high, low, and in between with a range of autobiography, satire, literary fiction, and fantasy, all of which was proudly uncompromising and unfiltered expression. It was a thoroughgoing world of exchange and excitement there for a while, and the younger cartoonists looked to Robert as a beacon and continuing inspiration. After all, he essentially created their vocations; he was the first one to make comics into a medium for any kind of content, and the first to declare it openly, unapologetically. Joe Sacco, who drew the comic books *Yahoo* and *Palestine*, recalls, "[My] generation of cartoonists was the somewhat square progeny of our Underground predecessors. Spain, S. Clay Wilson, Bill Griffith, and, of course, Crumb were like wild, anarchic iconoclasts to us. By contrast, we were almost prim and proper suburbanites. They were far removed from the mainstream, and we entered it. But I for one hold them near and dear. I'm both astonished and shocked by how far they pushed at the boundaries of what was acceptable and then what was barely fathomable. They did us a service even if my contemporaries and I mostly never felt the impulse or rationale to push things as far. But would I ever have done a series like *Palestine* without a sense of the reckless that Crumb and the others established?"

Unusually for Robert, he workshopped sections of that first *Mystic Funnies* in his sketchbook, achieving a fairly tight narrative before proceeding with the actual cartooning. The cover, one of Robert's latter-day masterpieces, has the old man and Foont walking through a park replete with symbols—trees in human form, a seven-headed snake, eyes in the sky, a wailing plant, a forest spirit, none of which Foont, forever unenlightened, can see. The entire thirty-six-page issue is a lively, meticulously drawn dialogue between Mr. Natural and various characters, paced at the speed of walking. Foont is forever sexually frustrated, scared, and unsure of his identity. Mr. Natural, sexually successful, comes clean that he now makes money by conducting seminars for wealthy Hollywood types. Mr. Natural points out to Foont who the *real* "saints" are—not the gurus in white robes, but people one passes unnoticed in the streets: average-looking working stiffs beloved by their families and kind to others. Neither Foont nor Mr. Natural, nor Schumann the Human, whom they encounter as a wannabe producer, can boast that. Neither can Robert. It's ultimately about living with contradiction. They can't change who they are. And one amped-up sex scene aside, it's an unusually quiet comic book about acceptance, something Robert was practicing while still trying to understand what might exist in the energy around him.

The second issue of *Mystic Funnies*, drawn in an inspired few months at Robert's swiftest pace since the early 1970s, was released in 1999. By now, Sophie was at art college, and Aline had a boyfriend in town, as well as a Greek lover she saw on vacations of her own. This all suited Robert's sense of himself and gave him a smidge more peace. His story "Bad Karma" occupies the entire issue. It follows Robert's stand-in, the Moron, as he walks over the faces of humanity until he arrives at an abyss and must hump into it. Then he finds himself with a gap-toothed Fairy Godmother not unlike Guntra of *The Yum-Yum Book*. Once again, the woman is both mother and sex-object. They have prolonged sex play until she rides away on horseback with a "normal" guy and leaves the Moron to scramble through a dense thorny bramble, as Robert did up in the Mer des Rochers. "Bad Karma" is a parable of Robert's self-image: walking alone through the social minefield of life, suffering no matter what his response, finding solace in women and yet feeling like a freak for his proclivities. The bramble is both a meditative place and a tangled morass that traps you, that you have to patiently work your way out of.

The third issue, his last solo comic book to date, was released in 2002 and returned to his multistory *Hup* format. In that issue he published his brilliant self-diagnosis "Don't Tempt Fate" and then, as if exorcising the demons of his childhood, a pornographic version of the old funny animal character Super Duck, ventilating the nasty, violent undercurrents of a beloved second-tier comic book of his boyhood, transforming it into a grotesque nightmare of dissolute domesticity and sexual hijinks.

* * *

At the turn of the twenty-first century the institutional art world began to take an interest in him. It had been building for a while, and coincided with both the rise of artists who cited him as an influence and a tentative embrace of cartoon imagery. Throughout the 1980s, Modernism in San Francisco did a steady business with his original art, including a handful of oil paintings that, when most successful, were Crumb takes on Kandinsky, and his only two major sculptures: *The Vulture Goddess*, a 1990–91 wood, Bondo, and lacquer life-size sculpture of the character in a sitting position, as if listening to a conversation in quiet judgment; and a 1995 sculpture of Devil Girl, her torso bent so that her butt rested on the top of her skull, one leg thrust into the air.

In the late 1980s an art dealer named Alexander Acevedo began acquiring enormous amounts of work from Dana, assorted friends, and Robert himself (one purchase in April 1993 enabled Robert and Aline to buy a Paris apartment). In late 1993 Alexander Gallery, owned by Acevedo, mounted an enormous retrospective of 600 pieces by Robert, accompanied by a 360-page catalog. There were sketchbook pages, American Greetings originals, covers and comics from *Zap, Hup, Motor City, Weirdo*, and *Arcade. A Short History of America* was there for $60,000. The original 143-page hand-colored *Yum Yum Book*, acquired from Dana, was up for $300,000.

And while Robert himself wasn't there, only he could draw a crowd with this description: "At the show's Halloween eve opening party, scores of costumed and black tie–wearing admirers traipsed through the gallery looking at the work while sipping white wine. Among the attendees were Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, Dr. Timothy Leary, John Kennedy, Jr., Crumb's son Jesse Crumb, and the novelty rock act Gwar. Kennedy, who is a New York City lawyer, was dressed as a vampire. When asked what he thought of the show, he replied, 'I'm a big fan of Crumb.'" Collector Christiaan Braun purchased, among other things, Robert's 1966–70 sketchbook and exhibited it in the 2001 landmark exhibition *Eye Infection*, at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, organized by the collector with a catalog essay from curator and writer Robert Storr. Here Robert was placed in an art-historical dialogue with Mike Kelley, Jim Nutt, Peter Saul, and H. C. Westermann. Together, these five artists form an alternative canon of American art—Kelley, the youngest, having imbibed the other four; Nutt, Saul, and Crumb having worked through their obsessions in entirely different ways, each marginalized by a theory-dominated art world; and Westermann, whose work emerged from the American vernacular as surely as Crumb's did. Robert hadn't seen Saul since they discussed *Zap* back in 1968. The painter, always quick with a line, advised Robert that if he *really* wanted to make some money, he oughta get out of cartooning and into the painting business.

In 1999, Paul Morris, whose eponymous gallery helped lead the way for contemporary spaces in what became New York's Chelsea arts district, was looking for a third artist to group with the cartoon language of painters Philip Guston and Barry McGee. The latter suggested Robert. That show, which offered a fresh context for all three artists, brought him to the attention of the New York–centric art world. Morris had purchased the exhibited works from Alexander Acevedo, unaware of how to contact the artist himself. One of his acquaintances, Robert's ex-girlfriend Kathy Goodell, offered to make the introduction and vouch for him to Robert. She still cared, and did both men an enormous favor. Over the next few years Robert exhibited his artwork with Morris in Chelsea, including numerous examples of his placemat drawings. With these as the base, a veritable cottage industry of Crumb drawings sprang to life in the 2000s.

A new generation of young artists claimed him as one of them: Nicole Eisenman, Rebecca Warren, and KAWS would all reference Robert in the coming years. Galleries and museums increasingly exhibited him in a variety of contexts, much to his bemused indifference. It is the pile of comic books that Robert claims as his legacy. Pages on a wall are a way to honor him and a way to engage the museum-going public, but that stack of newsprint is where his greatest work resides. Robert, never looking for "high culture" legitimacy, and generally regarding the trappings of museums as a nuisance, tolerated it but never sought it out. The printed books were all the "exhibiting" he ever needed or desired. He was the subject of museum retrospectives in America and Europe, and was enshrined in a group of fifteen cartoonists including George Herriman, Charles M. Schulz, Harvey Kurtzman, and Art Spiegelman in the *Masters of American Comics* exhibition, which toured the country from 2005 to 2007. At the press conference for his 2012 retrospective exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, he more or less dismissed the project, saying the whole thing wasn't his idea, that the rooms full of his original drawings made him realize he'd done enough work. The museum's director, who was used to artists at least keeping their misgivings between colleagues, was embarrassed by what he took as a disavowal. But Robert had once again had enough of being "R. Crumb."

If the prestige didn't mean much, the money was nice—through sales of his art both via galleries and privately, he and Aline found some long-awaited stability in the early 2000s. They thrived in the village, buying and fixing up old houses to rent to friends at cost and supporting local causes. In 2005, Aline cofounded an art gallery, Galerie Vidourle Prix, named for the town's river, with her friend Julie Katan. Set into what had been a small grocery store, it exhibited local artists and became a de facto Crumb gift shop as well. On Saturday mornings Aline and Julie were there to chat with friends and curious viewers in informal sessions somewhere between a salon and a coffee klatch. Sometimes, leading tourists to the gallery, promoting the Crumb silkscreens available, was Aline's brother, Alex Goldsmith. In 2001, Alex, after years of drug addiction, was living out of his car in New Jersey. Aline and Robert flew him to Sauve, set him up in an apartment, and gave him a six-hundred-euro-a-month allowance. He was a spectral presence around the village, sometimes quite lucidly helping Robert with secretarial work, other times forging Robert's name and selling things on eBay. He almost died in the spring of 2022, and Aline got him admitted into a long-term care facility. There he languished for eighteen months, until he recovered in late 2023 and wanted out of the depressing facility. Robert now pays Alex's rent on a small apartment in Sauve and gives him one hundred euros a week.

Jesse Crumb struggled as well. Throughout the 2000s he was off and on opioids and dabbling in cocaine and heroin. He kept his marriage together and bought some property outside of Eureka with money he got from selling sketchbooks given to him by Robert. He rented some of the property to some Bulgarians, who set up a large marijuana-growing operation there. Robert was desperate to help Jesse get clean and keep him employed, but he is also a perfectionist. The Crumb products, which Jesse was solely licensed to produce, had to be made well, consistently, and at a reasonable price. Jesse had good ideas but didn't have the discipline or the temperament to maintain physical production and manage the people involved, not to mention the funds flowing in. Robert received a steady stream of complaints from old friends and vendors alike about quality, shipping, and customer service. Jesse took each remark as an attack on his personal worth and proof of Robert's lack of faith in and love for him.

Robert replied to one of Jesse's numerous angry responses with raw sadness: "Yes, I am weak and selfish… I'm not a great father to you and never have been… I guess we both just have to accept that… I can't change… It's too late… I've tried, but I'm not too good at it. Was never really cut out for it… Too self-centered, too absorbed in my own fantasies… not great parent material never thought I was… I was dragged kicking and screaming into parental responsibility, both times… I tried harder with Sophie than I did with you, because, partly, I was older—38—when she came along… I was more settled, more resigned to my fate, in a sense, and partly out of guilt over how badly I'd done the first time, with you and Dana… But even with Sophie I'm not so sure I was the father she needed… Because for the most part I am just a child myself… I could not offer a firm, sure, guiding hand to my children… A big part of me is still just a fear-ridden, timid little boy… You know this about me, though it may be painful for you to acknowledge even to yourself… but there it is…"

He did try harder with Sophie, spending hours playing with her as a child, and, with Aline, maintaining a close and supportive relationship throughout her teenage years After college, Sophie traveled to Berkeley and New York. After he'd practically smothered her with love and heaped praise on her for everything, she was then, according to Robert, "neurotic and full of anger and self-hatred coupled with a self-important ego," but, he added, "she is a very talented artist and musician." But she was out on her own now, and he and Aline worried. She drew two accomplished and funny issues of *Belly Button Comix*, about young love and neurosis, and lived for a while in C-Squat, a communal house in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where she developed an addiction to heroin. Robert and Aline were, like any parents, enormously concerned. They had emphasized her freedom, allowed and subsidized it, and now she was rebelling by going someplace darker than her parents. "How could she have been so reckless," they said to each other. Eventually she would return to the South of France and, with support from her parents and a medical specialist, wean herself off the drug. Art, music, and a shared sense of storytelling bound her close to Robert and Aline, who kept their daughter close in their lives.

In 2006, after a phone call in which Robert suggested Jesse go easier on people, and perhaps even think about withdrawing a bit from the business, Jesse wrote: "Once again… I think that much of your opinion about my faults is actually about needing… desperately needing a reason for yourself… to keep me away… to make me out to be the problem… instead of simply your own guilt… or whatever it is that keeps you from letting me off the hook for my mistakes… which when placed in perspective… are hardly the horrible type… anger in business is not really that big a deal… unless you need it to be… NO human beings are left behind in my wake… no innocents… all of them are professionals who should be able to take the vicissitudes of business intensity… But NO! you need to make me feel like shit… why have I not read your letter…???? YOU CAN'T BE TRUSTED! simple as that…" And, on some level, Jesse's complaint is understandable. Robert will say yes to everything and then disavow the results. He is not intentionally lying, but by being passive he avoids taking responsibility. This can be maddening for collaborators, not to mention a child already fed up with his father's lax parenting.

Ultimately, the relationship simply came apart. In December 2006 Robert ended their business relationship, sending his son a severance payment of $12,000 and the assurance that he would receive his percentage of any silkscreen prints produced because of the relationships he facilitated, and telling him, "You're going to have to fend for yourself. This dependence on me and my work has not been a good thing for you. It has not helped you in any way except to incline you to think of yourself as an invalid. You're smart, you're talented, you'll figure out some other way to make it."

Robert assured Jesse that his future inheritance was secure and that he hoped for a future relationship, but their business association was over. It wasn't, quite. Sometime in the early 2000s, Jesse, having been granted broad control over Robert's licensing, sublicensed his father's work to another entity, which used the loose contract language to claim rights and commissions over all Crumb merchandising, long after Robert and Jesse split. A legal battle ensued, only resolved in 2021 in Robert's favor after he spent a quarter of a million dollars. This was, as Robert would put it, his karma. The endless pushing and pulling of the golden goose that was “R. Crumb,” with the man himself trying to say yes, trying to help, but inevitably leaving a mess.

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CHAPTER 24

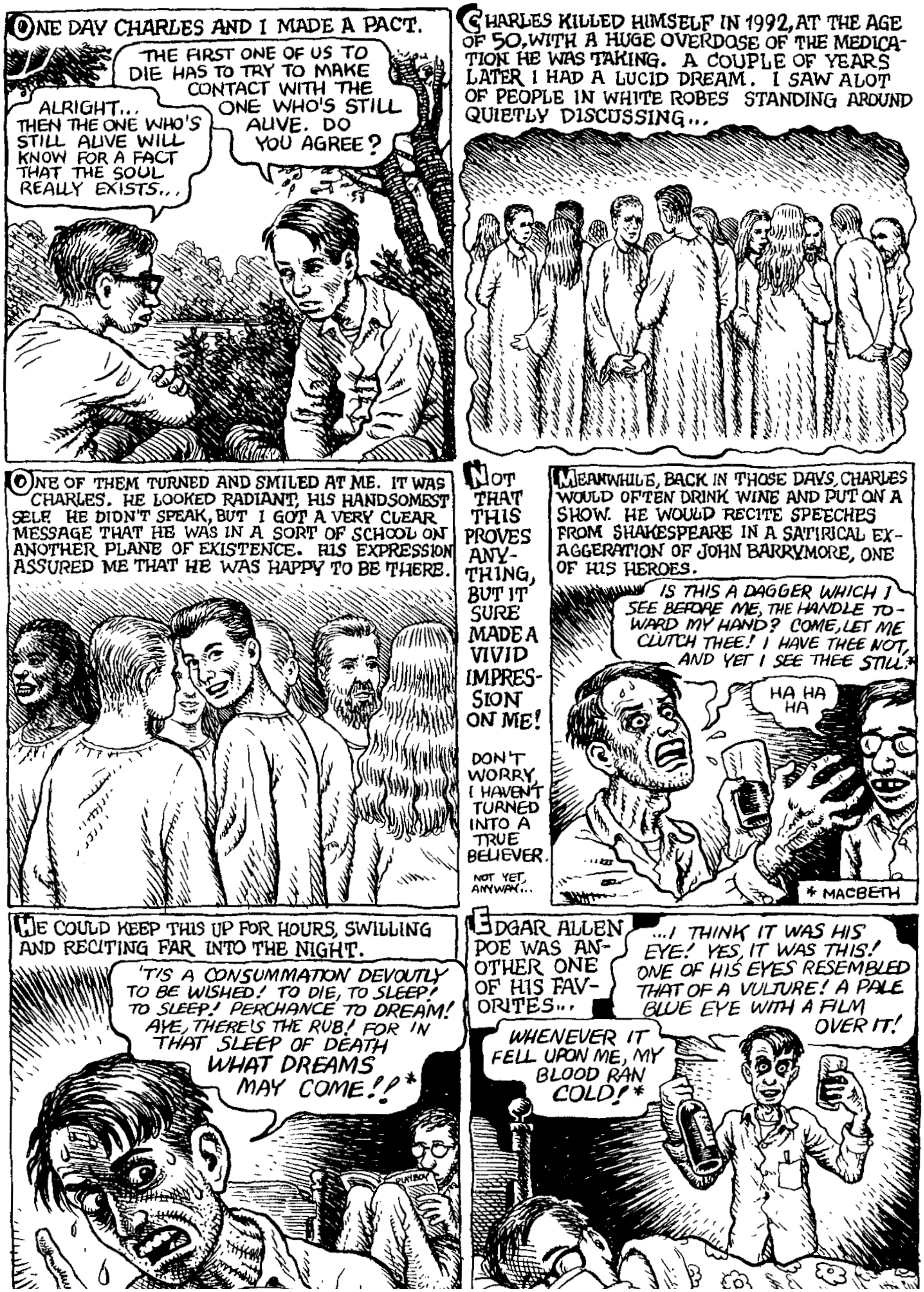
Genesis

In the early 2000s, comic books were gradually being supplanted by graphic novels. The term itself had been kicked around since the 1960s and now came to signify long-form, serious-minded comics. Books like Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* were receiving deserved accolades and fueling interest from publishers in book-length fiction and nonfiction comics. Robert was still working on his pile of comic books. *Mystic Funnies* ended in 2001, and in 2004 Robert completed his farewell to Charles, dead twenty-two years by then, in "Walkin' the Streets," a ten-page story for *Zap* 15 in which he remembers nights spent moving through Dover, talking about the mysteries of life that confounded him then and for decades, avoiding a home filled with cigarette smoke, violence, and madness. His relentless drive to investigate, to question, to tell stories, was perhaps his best inheritance. In "Walkin' the Streets," his parents appear, as does Charles and Robert's old friend Tom Freeman. God is a presence. As Robert tells it, he and Charles made a promise that whoever died first must make contact. It's a summation of his life, complete with his usual shrug at the end, allowing us in and just as summarily sending us out. "I've internalized so much of what Charles gave me that I can't separate it out," he says. "One time I went under regressive hypnosis and at some point I realized that maybe it was Charles's karma to give me this life as an artist. I was a person who had no life, who had no chance of a life, and he gave it to me. And then he went and failed. He went down. Maybe he owed me a karmic debt from a past life? Who knows. That's the realm of mysticism." Robert completed almost four pages of "Walkin' the Streets" shortly before Charles died in 1992. After his death, he wasn't sure how to proceed; it was nearly another dozen years before he picked it back up and finished the comic, which was his final significant solo story for nearly two decades.

Now Robert began casting around for a long-term project. The land and people of the United States, like his *Zap* conspirators, mostly existed for him as memories and fragments from the past. He saw his old friends, bought and traded old records, and made the rounds, when requested, of the ceremonies and festivals that become the second life of well-known artists. What he knew about the United States and the world was, in an increasingly digital world, secondhand. He couldn't regularly peruse a bookstore or newsstand, or eavesdrop in a café. Information came through unfocused: links to online articles sent to his secretary to print; the *New Yorker*, to which he and Aline contributed strips; the *Comics Journal, Harper's*, and whatever books came over the transom. He lost his sense of a larger national context. He needed a focus, something that was rooted in neither his nation nor his own consciousness.

In his sketchbook he had been thinking about making comics rooted in his intertwined obsessions with cultural norms, history, and spirituality that stretched back to his struggles with Catholicism and his teenage discovery of Mark Twain's *What Is Man?* He toyed with an adaptation of *My Secret Life* by "Walter," an account of one wealthy gentleman's erotic adventures in Victorian England. An eleven-volume work culled by the author from his contemporaneous diaries, the book has a matter-of-fact prose style and is scrupulously detailed about every sexual act, partner, and craving. For Robert, the no-frills prose language is not dissimilar to his own, and the questing after every variety of woman, while not his particular fetish, was, in its obsession, entirely relatable. After trying it out in his sketchbook, he determined it would consume far too much time and energy to get it accurate enough to satisfy his standards. If he did return to it, he decided, it would be done with a brush, with plenty of chiaroscuro effects, and not with the more labor-intensive pen.

He began as well to work on the story of Adam and Eve—joking around in his sketchbook with Adam as numbskull and the serpent as humanoid wise guy. He showed some of his Adam and Eve drawings to Denis Kitchen, thinking perhaps to do just that story. Kitchen instead pitched him on the idea of doing a graphic novel of the Book of Genesis. The market was primed for a book-length Robert Crumb story, and all the better something as perverse sounding as the Bible. Robert, knowing it would be a huge amount of work, told him he'd need at least $50,000 to make it worthwhile. Kitchen partnered with the literary agent Judy Hansen in the US, and in a sign of how charged the market was for graphic novels in the early 2000s, in conjunction with Robert's international agent Lora Fountain, they sold the project to W. W. Norton in August 2004 for an advance of $253,000. He was sixty-one when he got going—late for a cartoonist to undertake such a thing, his longest comic since *The Yum Yum Book* forty years before. It was an act of unusual hubris. "Imagine," as Robert's Norton editor Robert Weil said, "thinking that you can illustrate the Bible. This is Michelangelo territory."


ONE DAY CHARLES AND I MADE A PACT.
THE FIRST ONE OF US TO DIE HAS TO TRY TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THE ONE WHO'S STILL ALIVE. DO YOU AGREE?
ALRIGHT... THEN THE ONE WHO'S STILL ALIVE WILL KNOW FOR A FACT THAT THE SOUL REALLY EXISTS...
CHARLES KILLED HIMSELF IN 1992, AT THE AGE OF 50, WITH A HUGE OVERDOSE OF THE MEDICATION HE WAS TAKING. A COUPLE OF YEARS LATER I HAD A LUCID DREAM. I SAW ALOT OF PEOPLE IN WHITE ROBES STANDING AROUND QUIETLY DISCUSSING...
ONE OF THEM TURNED AND SMILED AT ME. IT WAS CHARLES. HE LOOKED RADIANT, HIS HANDSOMEST SELF. HE DIDN'T SPEAK, BUT I GOT A VERY CLEAR MESSAGE THAT HE WAS IN A SORT OF SCHOOL ON ANOTHER PLANE OF EXISTENCE. HIS EXPRESSION ASSURED ME THAT HE WAS HAPPY TO BE THERE.
NOT THAT THIS PROVES ANYTHING, BUT IT SURE MADE A VIVID IMPRESSION ON ME!
DON'T WORRY, I HAVEN'T TURNED INTO A TRUE BELIEVER.
NOT YET, ANYWAY...
MEANWHILE, BACK IN THOSE DAYS, CHARLES WOULD OFTEN DRINK WINE AND PUT ON A SHOW. HE WOULD RECITE SPEECHES FROM SHAKESPEARE IN A SATIRICAL EXAGGERATION OF JOHN BARRYMORE, ONE OF HIS HEROES.
IS THIS A DAGGER WHICH I SEE BEFORE ME, THE HANDLE TOWARD MY HAND? COME, LET ME CLUTCH THEE! I HAVE THEE NOT, AND YET I SEE THEE STILL.*
HA HA HA
* MACBETH
HE COULD KEEP THIS UP FOR HOURS, SWILLING AND RECITING FAR INTO THE NIGHT.
'T'S A CONSUMMATION DEVOUTLY TO BE WISHED! TO DIE, TO SLEEP! TO SLEEP! PERCHANCE TO DREAM! AYE, THERE'S THE RUB! FOR IN THAT SLEEP OF DEATH WHAT DREAMS MAY COME!!*
PLAYBOY
EDGAR ALLEN POE WAS ANOTHER ONE OF HIS FAVORITES...
...I THINK IT WAS HIS EYE! YES, IT WAS THIS! ONE OF HIS EYES RESEMBLED THAT OF A VULTURE! A PALE BLUE EYE WITH A FILM OVER IT!
WHENEVER IT FELL UPON ME, MY BLOOD RAN COLD!*

*HAMLET
*THE TELL-TALE HEART

“Walkin’ the Streets,” *Zap* 15, 2004.

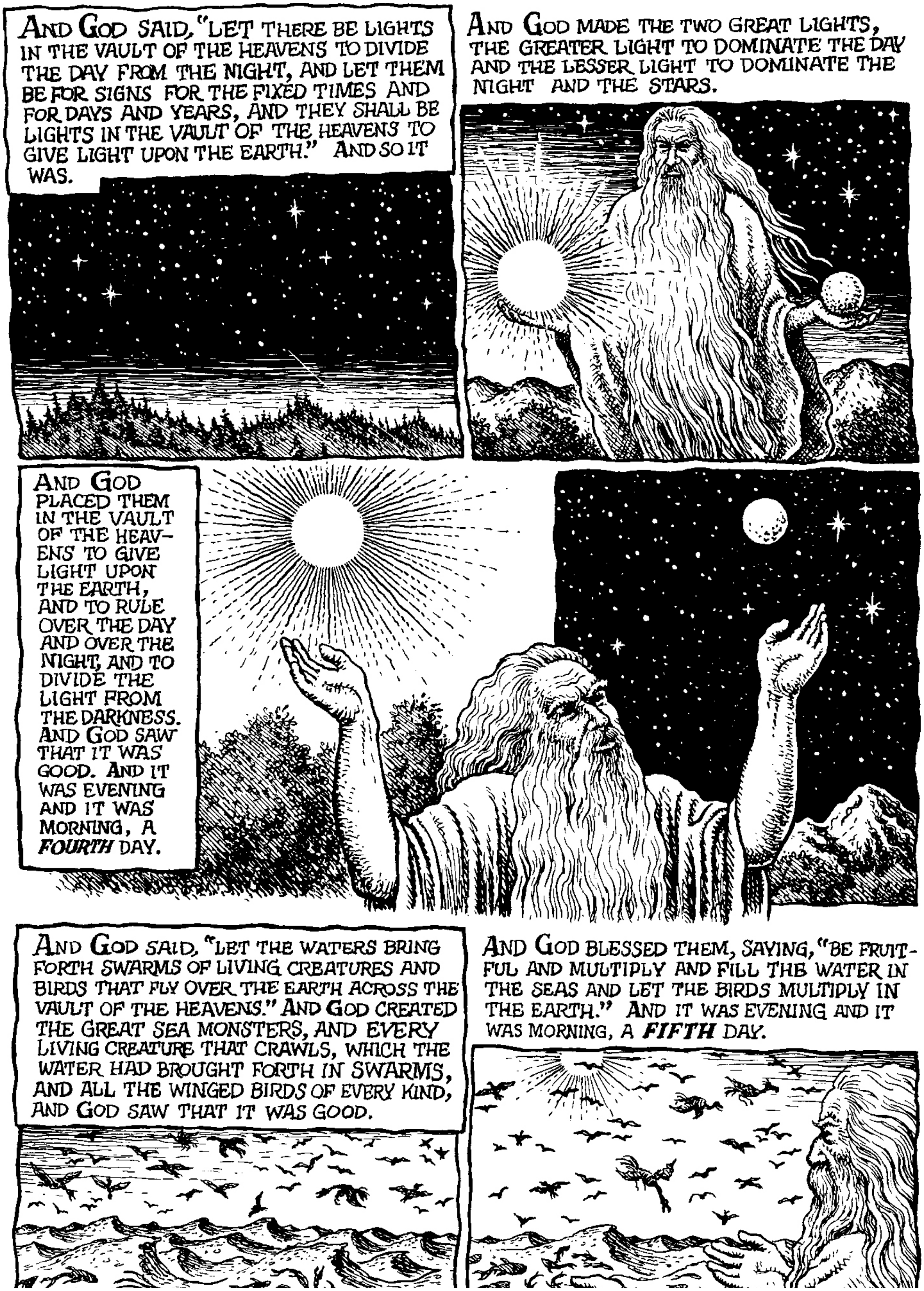
Through Genesis he could explore the mysteries and strangeness of the stories that provided the moral codes of Western civilization. This was the ultimate existential question: What’s really going on? What was encoded in the stories? What was left out? His earliest indoctrination was to the Catholic Church, his childhood understanding of the brutality wrought in the name of religion pulled back the curtain on society, and his teenage disavowal of religion was a definitive break from mainstream society. Genesis symbolizes the start of the moralities that shaped and deformed his family, that he relentlessly examined and kicked against. Robert’s restless curiosity can’t be overestimated—his searching mind always needs a place to focus: sex, music, family, meditation, science, and history. He’d long had an interest in ancient Mesopotamia, had read books about Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, and Assyria and looked at photos of artifacts, as well as the objects themselves in the British Museum. He had noted, with curiosity, how the mythologies of the Sumerians and Babylonians contained similarities to that of the early Hebrew stories. And now in Genesis he found an inexhaustible area of research, and a superb challenge for his art.

There were a few earlier attempts at retelling Genesis as a comic, including 1943’s *Picture Stories from the Bible*, published by the still-nascent EC, with the intention of bringing the stories from the “good book” to children across the country. This project, scripted by Montgomery Mulford and illustrated by Don Cameron in an entirely neutral mode, was everything that the 1950s EC of *Mad* would vanquish—earnest, square material. The 232-page comic book promised “the entire Old Testament told chronologically for the first time in full color continuity!”

He worked from three sources: the King James edition of the Bible, Robert Alter’s 2004 translation *The Five Books of Moses*, and the

Jewish Publication Society's edition of the Torah, and a few times making his own translation with the help of Aline's old friend from Arizona Betsy Klein, who read Hebrew. From the beginning Robert realized he had to stick to the text itself, that this could not be a retelling or a mythologizing: "Reading the real thing closely made me realize I should just work from the text itself. It is so bizarre in itself, there's no need to satirize it." It contained so much more than the stories he remembered, and had the duality of seriousness and absurdity he relished, and deep mysteries to unlock. Why, he wondered, would there be two different stories of the creation of man, one right after the other, with no attempt to reconcile them? First God creates man and woman simultaneously. In the following story God creates Adam alone and then Eve to soothe his loneliness. Rather than choose one, Robert tells both visually, which forces the reader to slow down and realize that Genesis is a collection of stories rather than a linear epic. There are, in fact, contradictions from the start. Robert's consistent drawings make us expect a straightforward story, so when the story suddenly begins again, it's all the more jarring.

Reinforcing the subversive idea that these are merely the facts, Robert insisted that he was only the illustrator taking a "job." He would only draw what was there: "[I am] very literal in my illustration of the text. I am in a sense, holding myself back… I am, in this work, the illustrator. The whole point is more or less to reveal the text to modern people by pictorializing it, to reveal every detail of it, as much as possible, to illustrate every word of it. This has never been done before, to my knowledge, and no wonder! It's a tedious task. I decided not to show penises and cunts or, you know, explicit penetration of sex organs, which would just limit the public acceptability factor too much, but I did decide to show people having sex in a 'soft core' way (Lot & his daughters, Abraham and Hagar), because that's what the text explicitly says, and again, I'm just the illustrator. I have to read a lot of background material and annotations found in the Jewish versions to help me to figure out how best to illustrate it… but often it's pretty wide open to anyone's interpretation, and often the Jewish scholars will admit that they don't know precisely what is meant by a particular passage or that the original Hebrew is sometimes very difficult to decipher… it's just so old, much of the original meaning and intent is lost in the mists of time. The two main points that I get from the *Genesis* narrative is that the cosmos is patriarchal, starting with God, and then the human patriarchs, the first-born son being the most important person in the clan, and the constantly reiterated point that God is giving to the Hebrews this certain piece of land, where they, his chosen people, will be fruitful and multiply. Almost the entire Old Testament is all about these two things—the patriarchy and the land."


AND GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHTS IN THE VAULT OF THE HEAVENS TO DIVIDE THE DAY FROM THE NIGHT, AND LET THEM BE FOR SIGNS FOR THE FIXED TIMES AND FOR DAYS AND YEARS, AND THEY SHALL BE LIGHTS IN THE VAULT OF THE HEAVENS TO GIVE LIGHT UPON THE EARTH." AND SO IT WAS.
AND GOD MADE THE TWO GREAT LIGHTS, THE GREATER LIGHT TO DOMINATE THE DAY AND THE LESSER LIGHT TO DOMINATE THE NIGHT AND THE STARS.
AND GOD PLACED THEM IN THE VAULT OF THE HEAVENS TO GIVE LIGHT UPON THE EARTH, AND TO RULE OVER THE DAY AND OVER THE NIGHT, AND TO DIVIDE THE LIGHT FROM THE DARKNESS. AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD. AND IT WAS EVENING AND IT WAS MORNING, A *FOURTH* DAY.
AND GOD SAID, "LET THE WATERS BRING FORTH SWARMS OF LIVING CREATURES AND BIRDS THAT FLY OVER THE EARTH ACROSS THE VAULT OF THE HEAVENS." AND GOD CREATED THE GREAT SEA MONSTERS, AND EVERY LIVING CREATURE THAT CRAWLS, WHICH THE WATER HAD BROUGHT FORTH IN SWARMS, AND ALL THE WINGED BIRDS OF EVERY KIND, AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD.
AND GOD BLESSED THEM, SAYING, "BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY AND FILL THE WATER IN THE SEAS AND LET THE BIRDS MULTIPLY IN THE EARTH." AND IT WAS EVENING AND IT WAS MORNING, A *FIFTH* DAY.

The Book of Genesis, 2009.

And yet Robert embraced an additional reading derived from Savina Teubal's *Sarah the Priestess: First Matriarch of Genesis*, in which she posits that there was once a matriarchal order gradually suppressed by the rise of city-states and the father-to-son order of transfer. This, Teubal proposes, explains some of the struggles of the female characters, which Robert foregrounds in his telling. As he told an interviewer: "The story of Abraham telling his wife Sarah to tell the pharaoh that she's his sister. The explanations by these scholars who are also religious believers, trying to give that story some moral justification, just bending over backwards trying to figure out what God meant to tell us in that story or what the real meaning of that is. Because it has to—it's the Bible; it has to have a higher moral purpose, right? When in fact it doesn't… It's slightly subversive to show a story like that." Instead of a moral rationale, Teubal theorizes that, as a high priestess, Sarah was part of a tradition called the *hieros gamos*. One of the functions of her role was to test the ruler's sexual powers in order to confirm his leadership, and throughout, the women play crucial roles in either steering or granting power.

Robert's *Genesis* is overwhelmingly thorough in its conception and execution, and, in its scenarios of transcendence, power, and domination, consistent with the artist's lifelong sensibility. So, while he says he's merely an illustrator, everything we see is a deliberate choice he made. He began with a baseline cultural vision: film epics, both B-grade and, most of all, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*, which he first saw at the Crest Theater in Oceanside, California, when he was just twelve years old. Since the 1960s, Robert has known where to look to produce something that can be both "objective" and personal. DeMille, like Disney, was inescapable for his generation. Never mind any ideas about historical accuracy, this was essentially about making something plausible.

After all, aside from archaeological findings, our vision of the biblical period is entirely invented.

For the look of God, he tried out God as a superior being from an ancient race, God as a Black woman, God as a borscht belt funnyman. But ultimately the character "God" was derived from a dream he'd had a few years before: "He had features almost like Mel Gibson or Charlton Heston, very severe but at the same time sort of anguished looking. And he was warning me about this destructive force that was getting stronger, and since He loved Earth or this reality or whatever you want to call it, he was enlisting me to be one of the people to protect this reality from this destructive force. When I was trying to figure out how to draw God I remembered that image, which I could look at only for a split second, it was painful to look at this face, it was so severe and yet so anguished." The emotive fleshiness of the Heston/Gibson visage was the white European "God" going back a millennium.

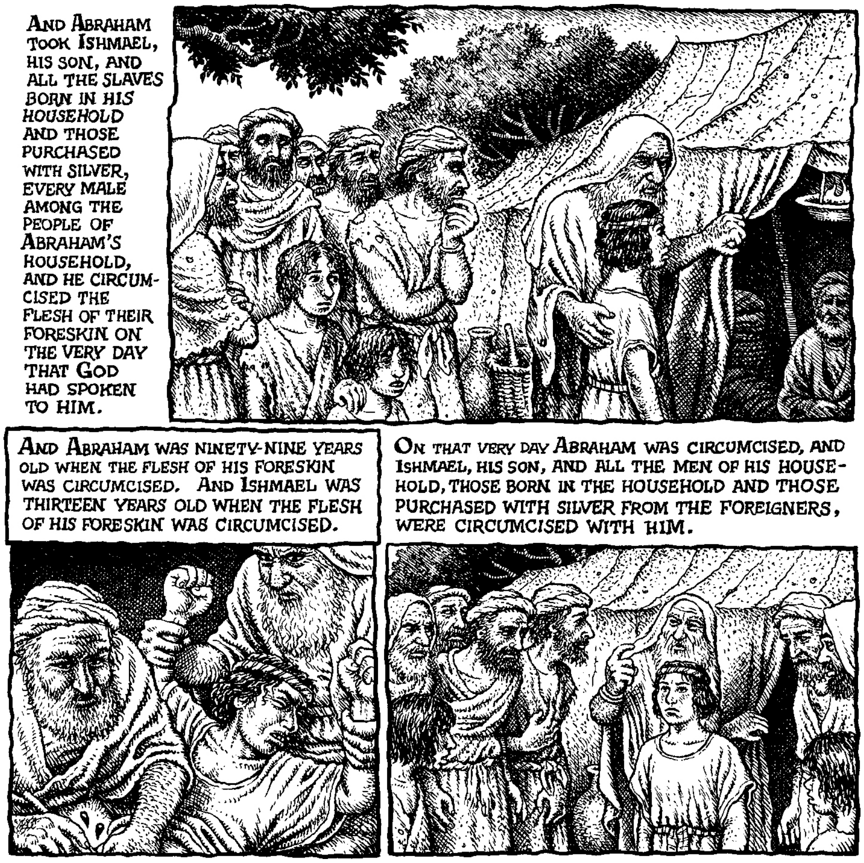
For architecture, technology, and costumes he studied DeMille in freeze frame, photographs of Syrian bas reliefs, a 1930s book with photographs of Ethiopian warriors, pictures of twentieth-century North African dwellings, and images of Egyptian structures. For the story of Abimelech, king of the Philistines, Robert looked at Carl Barks's *Donald Duck in Ancient Persia* for a few details. For the animals and human poses his old friend Justin Green suggested Eadweard Muybridge's late-nineteenth-century books *Animals in Motion* and *The Human Figure in Motion*, which compiles sequences of thirty-six pictures of a specific action—a perfect resource for, say, Jacob wrestling with the angel, among other motion-driven scenes.

Work on the book consumed so much time and energy that after the first five pages were complete in February 2005 Aline began renting Robert remote cabins without any distractions. One was up the hill from a campground; another was in a tiny town way up a series of narrow, winding mountain roads; still another was a drafty and cold studio. Aline alone would know his location, and would bring groceries and mail, sometimes stay for the weekend, but mostly he was alone, an ascetic like so many before him, wrestling with a text that felt inexhaustible. In solitude he could complete two-thirds of a page in a day. If the scenes were more detailed, then he could complete about half a page. And there would be corrections, especially in the first section of the book. Initially the first humans wore sandals, but Robert realized later that of course they'd be barefoot; later, a Morrocco-born friend noted that Robert's tents looked like contemporary camping gear and his clothes like bathrobes. So, with patience and correction fluid, Robert redrew feet, tents, and clothing.

Robert worked out the historical details, panel compositions, and one or two pages at a time in pencil on scrap paper as he went along. It was only in March 2008, after completing 144 pages, that he made rough panel breakdowns for the rest of the book, to make sure he could fit everything into two hundred pages. He drew with crow quill nibs and Pelikan black drawing ink, half on Strathmore vellum surface paper—a hard sheet that preserves the integrity of fine-line ink drawing—and the other half on the back of 1950s comic book original art, which was of finer quality than contemporary drawing paper, which was becoming harder to find. Most of the sheets are twelve by fifteen inches and the image area itself was around eleven by fourteen.

He could not neutralize his style—the men and women look like Crumb men and women. Nor could he control his urge to render the world with almost excruciating detail, from the forbidden passages of Sodom to the brutality of the land of Shechem to the trials of Rebekah, even giving distinct faces to all seventy names of Esau's lineage. The details carry narrative meaning with a grit and weight that a more casual rendering approach could not. Telling the story of Abraham's covenant, Robert pictures mysticism, duty, fear, pain, and tradition in just four panels. First God floats above Abraham in an aura of wavy lines; the next panel is back to mundane earth: Abraham escorts Ishmael past a line of anxious men into a tent for the very first circumcision, like a parent bringing their kid for a root canal. In the next panel the circumcision is visible only by the pained look on the boy's face. And the following panel has Ishmael grimly exiting as Abraham motions to the next customer. It's as much Robert's world as a Cleveland grocery store or a New York recording office.

There were illustration jobs along the way, but after over three years, and five month-long periods of isolation, on December 30, 2008, Robert completed the book. The cover of the book, designed as he would have any comic book of his, boasts, "The first book of the Bible Graphically Depicted! Nothing Left Out!" Robert's cover line is both a statement of fact and a trick: you can't blame Crumb for anything on the page, oh no! Not Crumb! Any weirdness there is canonical! It's about playing it straight to get weird.


And Abraham took Ishmael, his son, and all the slaves born in his household and those purchased with silver, every male among the people of Abraham's household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on the very day that God had spoken to him.
And Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised. And Ishmael was thirteen years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised.
On that very day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael, his son, and all the men of his household, those born in the household and those purchased with silver from the foreigners, were circumcised with him.

The covenant of Isaac, *The Book of Genesis*, 2009.

When *The Book of Genesis Illustrated by R. Crumb* was released in the fall of 2009, Robert's go-to line was that he did it for the money, that it was an illustration job, nothing more. It was a sly deflection, utterly in keeping with his sense of himself and the culture. He knew, as indeed it was, that the two-hundred-page masterpiece would be treated as "Mr. Keep On Truckin' does the Bible" and generally with incredulity. *Him doing this? How ridiculous.* So he undercut it himself, partly out of habit, partly to give the people the pratfall they wanted. But in fact it's a logical place for him to have landed. He'd spent over two decades drawing nonfiction and adaptations, immersed in the project of giving visual life to ideas, places, and characters that were sometimes fantastic, mysterious, or centuries in the past. This was the ultimate mystery to pursue. It gratified his sense of craft and required a tamping down of his ego; just as in *Art & Beauty*, he made himself subservient to an external source. Moreover, when looking at art, Robert has said he goes toward what he's called "black holes"—spaces that imply a sudden, unusually generative depth. What better black hole for himself than Genesis? What was unpredictable was the sheer energy it took, and the ultimate impact on his artistic life.

The reaction to the book was mixed. Robert was the first cartoonist to get a *Paris Review* interview. The *Comics Journal* dedicated over 150 pages to the project. It was still unusual for comics to be extensively reviewed in magazines and literary journals, but Harold Bloom, Robert Alter, and other scholars reviewed the book, mostly positively. Alter, while praising the project in general and noting the difference between a single or even suite of paintings about Genesis and an entire comic book, made this wise observation: "The Midrash, produced in late antiquity, is often an interpretive fleshing-out of the spare biblical narratives, an attempt to fill in the narrative gaps and read closely and imaginatively between the lines. And this is essentially what Crumb does graphically, with a special emphasis on the element of flesh." This is Robert's final grafting of his consciousness—the mystic, the lowbrow, the erotic, the ironic—onto Western civilization.

And yet, among the comics cognoscenti, there was a feeling that this version of comics—two hundred pages of a consistent grid of detailed panels—was perhaps not effective, making it into something closer to sequential illustrations than cartooning, the latter being the idea that comics function as a symbol language that we read as we see it. In this formulation, comics are about expressive reduction, pictographs that can be grasped in an instant—the circles and squares of Charles Schulz and Chris Ware—as opposed to the lushly rendered realism of Robert's *Genesis*, which requires more intensive looking to parse out the action in any given panel. Even Robert wonders aloud: "I'm not sure that in doing a really long work like *Genesis* that all that crosshatching is helpful. It might have been better if I had used a brush and done a lot more stark black and white, you know? Reading pages and pages of all that, the eye gets fatigued, bogged down; I'm not sure." For decades Robert's comics flowed with a driving rhythm, and embraced variable moods and tones as readers followed characters through different settings. In *Genesis*, however, each panel is a world, every detail is equal, so that we stop at each panel to take it in and then move to the next. It is a slow read, without the pulsing urgency of his other comics. And yet the slowness pays off in the pleasure of plunging into one drawing after another. Reading the book is as perhaps it should be, an act of devotion to Robert's vision.

The competitive ego in Robert could feel satisfied that he produced something sui generis in the medium. Hubris, yes, but how else are we to make our way through the spiritual and physical planes without projecting ourselves forward? In his thinking, he needed to keep striving artistically, but balanced with servitude. He needed to feel humbly in service to something—either his family, a text, or his own subconscious. Being of use in that way became increasingly important as he aged. *Genesis* is Robert bringing all his frameworks and all his skills to a subject that demanded it, and then held him to the implicit promise.

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CHAPTER 25

The Old Magician

Robert was sixty-six when *Genesis* was released and exhausted from the effort. Because of the solitary and physically intense labor of writing, drawing, and composing comics, few cartoonists produce this level of work at that age, and in the decade following its release Robert would say that *Genesis* burned him out forever. It almost looked like retirement. *Genesis* was and remains Robert's bestselling book by a wide margin. The original drawings were the subject of an international five-museum tour from 2010 to 2011, and then sold to the Lucas Museum of Narrative Art for $2.9 million, a sale that became the source of a hilarious "what do we do with all this cash" installment of his ongoing collaborative comic strips with Aline. These ink-on-paper conversations in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine, Harper's*, and the *New York Review of Books* became the lens through which Robert presented his life to his public. Aline the optimist, Robert the curmudgeon, both of them bewildered by the world but in love with their home, their village, their growing family.

In 2006, Sophie Crumb returned to France after three years in Brooklyn and Berkeley. Like her parents, she's a yarn spinner, but comics ultimately were just too close to home, and she turned instead to small-scale, finely drawn surrealist visions and delicate portraits. Sophie met and fell in love with a local construction worker, and in the ensuing years they had three children together. The success of *Genesis* prompted two publishing projects with W. W. Norton that consolidated the idea of the Crumbs as a familial artistic force. *Drawn Together* (2012) is an anthology of Robert and Aline's collaborations; *Sophie Crumb: Evolution of a Crazy Artist*, published in 2010, is a collection of Sophie's artwork from age two to twenty-eight. Robert and Aline kept all of her artwork since she was two years old, savoring it as their parents never did for them; together they edited and sequenced the book, creating a unique document of a creative sensibility evolving in real time. It was also, in a sense, a continuation of the Crumb siblings' *Animal Town Comics*. As a child, Sophie had once even copied some of the same Carl Barks covers as Charles, as well as Charles's own early comic books, with uncanny precision. The book was an act of devotion from her parents and not, for Sophie, a launching point for a grand career. It was important to her to establish a life outside of work: "I like living, something that my dad didn't do that much. Driving, swimming, enjoying life surrounded by chaos and life. So, I do all the stuff that he never did." She found happiness doing just that, as a mother of three and a warm and tough, devoted daughter. Robert and Aline helped with childcare and kept their door open for their grandchildren, always ready to play with and entertain the kids. This close-knit family also gave them material for fond and funny strips about being naughty grandparents and the joys and pains of aging.

Robert's life began to get smaller even as, in many ways, it was enriched by his growing family. All around him, as for all of us as we age, people began to fade away and relationships slowly wound down. In 2009, Carol Vinson had a stroke in Ashland. Robert stayed with her as she recovered, cleaned her home, and looked after her as best he could. As the years passed and Carol regained some independence, the relationship began to fade. Robert was increasingly nervous about her traveling to France, and the possibility of an accident there and becoming ensnared in a foreign medical system. At home, she at least had friends and strong family ties. It was also becoming, at age seventy-six, increasingly anxiety-provoking for him to take those long trips. In 2019, after Carol's last trip to Paris that fall, they decided it was time to end things. She continued to exist in his sketchbooks and in print. On some level, Robert says the affair is what kept his marriage together. And yet, on reflection, he knew that his sexual focus on Carol's body hurt Aline. No matter that she had a boyfriend for decades. No one is above jealousy.

The *Zap* brotherhood lost two more members. In 2008, S. Clay Wilson suffered a traumatic brain injury after a late-night fall. He never recovered, declining steadily until his death in 2021. Spain Rodriguez passed away in San Francisco from cancer in 2012. He'd drawn remarkable comics until the very end, never wavering from his commitment to the medium and the cause. Like Robert, he found tremendous joy in his life with his wife, journalist and filmmaker Susan Stern, and their daughter, Nora. Spain's self-portrait hangs behind Robert's drawing table, gazing out over his shoulders as he draws. In 2014, *Zap* at last came to a close after thirty-six years with issue 16, which included new strips by Robert and Aline (at last breaking into the boys' club), unfinished work by Spain, and new art by the remaining contributors. The entire run was collected that same year in an oversized slipcased five-volume hardcover set.

Dana Crumb didn't live to see the finale of the comic she'd helped launch. The 2000s were unkind to her. She was estranged from her children, obese, chronically ill, and teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. There were tax liens on the Potter Valley property and she'd sold her copyrights, along with every piece of Crumb memorabilia. Robert gave her $2,500 to help out in 2012, and another $5,000 soon after that. After several lengthy illnesses she died in August 2014. Her home, the place in which she and Robert and Jesse had tried to start anew in 1969, fell into disrepair and is now a marijuana farm surrounded by tall chain-link fencing topped by security cameras.

With so much energy devoted to family and friends, and spent on *Genesis*, in the 2010s Robert mostly drew one-off images for exhibitions or in trade for records. He felt he'd completed his solo work in comics, wondered if he lacked the drive and selfish ego required to embark on another solo comic book or graphic novel. His drawing activity now always required an external purpose. The 78s Robert was searching for can cost $5,000 or $10,000 each. The idea of spending that kind of money seems wasteful and decadent to him. Rather, he preferred to collect as he always had: by trading drawings, even if his drawings might be worth five or ten times the value of the slab of shellac. He lavished his obsessive attention on these images, bringing all the research and energy of his *Art & Beauty* mode to commissions that ranged from photorealistic portraits of musicians to detailed imaginings of sexual fetishes. There are record rooms around the world adorned with Robert's drawings of long-gone musicians—the perfect trade for a long-gone record. Aline wasn't a fan of this practice, but as a tacit compromise he allowed Marc Jacobs and Stella McCartney to use his images on clothing, which thrilled Aline (and wasn't bad for the bank account either). The David Zwirner gallery, one of the three largest art galleries in the world, has worked with him since 2006, exhibiting and selling *The Book of Genesis*, offering his sketchbooks for $900,000 each, and prompting him with ideas for salable images, like a meticulous portrait of Stormy Daniels, which he doesn't consider compromising so long as it's interesting for him to draw.

He has maintained his class allegiances but certainly made allowances for the needs and desires of his family, which he no longer regards as a separate entity. He says, “Zwirner is interesting. It’s scary, it is scary. You go there, they’re all nice people, just wide-eyed art idealists. They’re all very nice and well-mannered and smart and stuff like that, and yet, what is the whole thing founded on? What’s the foundation? Money and power. So, where’s your allegiances to the working classes now, jerky? It’s hypocritical.” Robert’s affiliation with a gallery of that size is unique among cartoonists, and a sign of his current status as an art historical figure with broad cultural currency. Robert remains baffled by the art world he has recently allowed into his life, the luxuries of which he enjoys, even as its nouveau riche customs and modern canon spooks him. But to his mind, since his publishing income is mostly limited to reprints, and he still resists numerous media and merchandising offers, it is the least harmful way to ensure financial security.

In 2016, Robert released the third and final installment of *Art & Beauty* both as a standalone magazine for Fantagraphics and as part of a collected volume published by David Zwirner Books. As if in response to the litany of openings and obligations, and the questions about his future in comics, *Art & Beauty* issue 3 opens with a text expressing bafflement at the art magazines he’s read: “While the question ‘what is art?’ can never be answered satisfactorily, a more pointed question relevant to this publication might be, is the copying of photographs an inferior form of artistic expression to drawing or painting directly from life? Once again, there seems to be no simple answer—copying from photos may well be inferior to working directly from life. Intuitively, it ‘feels’ like ‘cheating,’ but then one can point to the example of Vermeer with his camera obscura. Was the great 17th century painter ‘cheating’? Who’s to judge? Art in our technological age exists in a vastly different context from the art of previous times, and the validity or originality of any contemporary work of art must be judged according to a very different set of criteria. You, dear reader, must use your own eyes and trust to your own judgment."

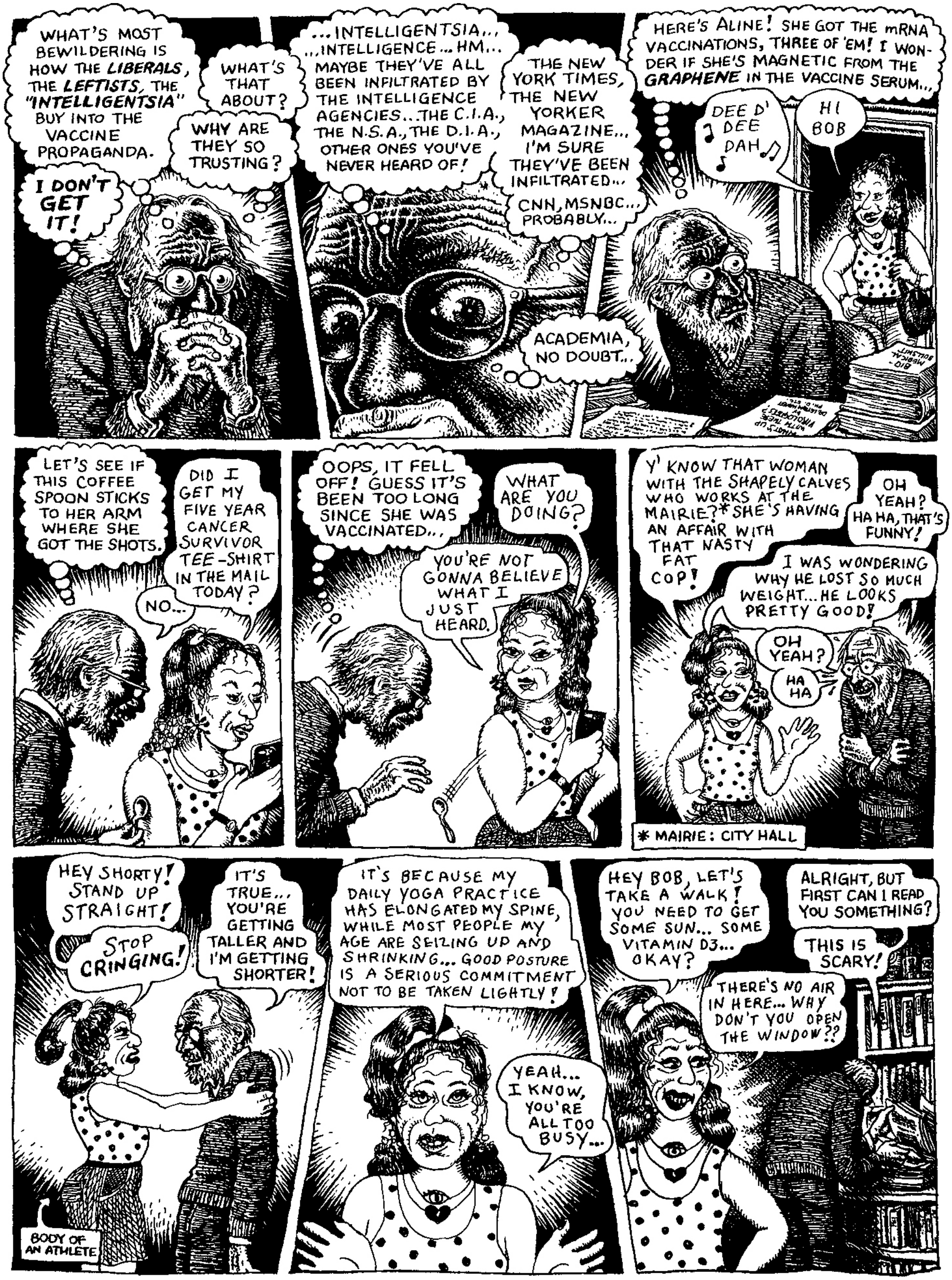
He was asking for himself, too. He is less and less interested in drawing from his imagination, preferring to become lost in a photograph. Crosshatching is a meditative activity for Robert. Rendering tone mark by mark, his face just inches above a sheet of paper on his tilted drawing table, the scritch-scritch of the pen nib the only sound in the room. The drawings, published as record covers, and in *Mineshaft*, a comics and literature zine to which he's contributed covers and interior images since 2001, are astonishing feats of craft but sometimes are missing a trace of Robert's improvisational consciousness. "You often read about artists, musicians who, as they get older, they get less spontaneous and just more involved in technique," he said. "That happened to me. It did. I'm a typical case of that. Losing the playfulness, that's the danger. Happens to musicians. A lot of the jazz musicians I admire became technically better later. But in their early stuff, though they're not as technically proficient, it has the bright enthusiasm of youth. And it's also more social. Later they withdraw into their technical challenges, as life will do to anyone in any art form."

After seven years of estrangement, Jesse got back in touch in 2013 wanting to reconcile: "At this point I would like to be able to resolve any thoughts that stand in the way of our relationship and hopefully recreate contact with you that is comfortable for both of us." This sounded rational and reasonable, so Robert readily agreed, and they resumed communication, each trading stories about their current lives. Jesse, now in his forties, focused on building a solid financial base for himself and Erica. He resolved, with Robert's blessing, to sell his collection of his father’s artwork, as well as a newly gifted sketchbook, so that he could buy land for himself and Erica. He and Robert reunited in California in the summer of 2016, which left them both in good spirits. They got along well—no conflicts, no anger or arguments, no accusations.

The following year, though, Jesse fell into a depression and slipped back into addiction again. His marriage was coming apart. Erica, who had patiently endured his ups and downs, was now fed up. Over the 2017 winter holidays, he was trying to wean himself off Xanax. On the evening of December 31, 2017, he left Eureka, driving to pick up Erica at a friend’s house in Potter Valley. He crossed the centerline of the highway and crashed into an oncoming pickup truck. Robert had spoken to him just two hours earlier. He died on January 3, 2018, at age forty-nine. “It was like the death of Charles, the death of Marty Pahls,” Robert said. “You just see it coming. You see that possibility coming. All of a sudden he’s in this car wreck. A sudden death, but his life was so up and down. The fact that he was still struggling with these drugs at that age, almost fifty. I didn’t see much hope for him. I was relieved that his pain was over.”

Those years were brutal to the family: In January 2017, Robert fell and broke the femur in his left leg, requiring surgery. After a few months on crutches, he recovered. Later that year, Aline had a cancerous tumor removed from her colon, along with a chunk of the organ itself. She underwent chemotherapy for months, and eventually was declared cancer-free in 2021. Robert’s sister Carol passed away at age seventy-nine in May 2020 in Rock Hall, Maryland. She’d stayed in touch with Robert and Aline, and lived quietly, working at the local public library and volunteering for various local causes. And life went on. Out of the fray, having achieved more than he could have ever dreamed of, comfortable, Robert declared one day in 2018 that he realized he was utterly free. Spiritually, financially, physically free. His sex drive, too, has diminished—he is no longer chained to that beast.

His mind had been free to roam, in fact, for a long while. Since *Genesis* he'd become very interested in the pharmaceutical industry and AIDS, and struck up an epistolary and telephone dialogue with a researcher named Christine Maggiore, who asserted that HIV did not cause AIDS and that AZT, the drug commonly used to treat HIV-positive patients, was largely responsible for the fatalities attributed to AIDS after the drug was introduced in 1987. Robert, among others in what is self-identified as the "AIDS dissident" community, believed Maggiore's sudden death in 2008 was perhaps payback for her openly doing battle with the pharmaceutical and medical establishment. He has spent a couple of decades deep into this research, corresponding with various researchers, and debating the subject with his old Haight-Ashbury friend Shelly Rosen, now a doctor in Seattle. As both his drawing activity and his libido declined, he became more and more obsessed with the medical and pharmaceutical industries. It, like record collecting, is an endless place to get lost in facts and theories. A rabbit hole of infinite potential, a plunge into a labyrinth. When COVID-19 became a worldwide concern, Robert commenced a whole new phase of investigating and questioning. His final collaboration with Aline (with Sophie adding panels as well) is the ten-page "Crumb Family Covid Exposé," which has the "anti-vax to the max" Robert crazed with paranoia. The comic was published, along with an earlier collaboration and some drawings, as *Sauve Qui Peut Comics*, released in 2022. He was and remains distrustful of the vaccines, not to mention Dr. Fauci, while Aline was vaccinated four times.


WHAT'S MOST BEWILDERING IS HOW THE LIBERALS, THE LEFTISTS, THE "INTELLIGENTSIA" BUY INTO THE VACCINE PROPAGANDA.
WHAT'S THAT ABOUT?
WHY ARE THEY SO TRUSTING?
I DON'T GET IT!
...INTELLIGENTSIA... ...INTELLIGENCE... HM... MAYBE THEY'VE ALL BEEN INFILTRATED BY THE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES... THE C.I.A., THE N.S.A., THE D.I.A., OTHER ONES YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF!
THE NEW YORK TIMES, THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE... I'M SURE THEY'VE BEEN INFILTRATED...
CNN, MSNBC... PROBABLY...
ACADEMIA, NO DOUBT...
HERE'S ALINE! SHE GOT THE mRNA VACCINATIONS, THREE OF 'EM! I WONDER IF SHE'S MAGNETIC FROM THE GRAPHENE IN THE VACCINE SERUM...
DEE D' DEE DAH
HI BOB
LET'S SEE IF THIS COFFEE SPOON STICKS TO HER ARM WHERE SHE GOT THE SHOTS.
DID I GET MY FIVE YEAR CANCER SURVIVOR TEE-SHIRT IN THE MAIL TODAY?
NO...
OOPS, IT FELL OFF! GUESS IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE SHE WAS VACCINATED...
WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
YOU'RE NOT GONNA BELIEVE WHAT I JUST HEARD.
Y' KNOW THAT WOMAN WITH THE SHAPELY CALVES WHO WORKS AT THE MAIRIE?* SHE'S HAVING AN AFFAIR WITH THAT NASTY FAT COP!
OH YEAH? HA HA, THAT'S FUNNY!
I WAS WONDERING WHY HE LOST SO MUCH WEIGHT... HE LOOKS PRETTY GOOD!
OH YEAH?
HA HA
* MAIRIE: CITY HALL
HEY SHORTY! STAND UP STRAIGHT!
STOP CRINGING!
IT'S TRUE... YOU'RE GETTING TALLER AND I'M GETTING SHORTER!
BODY OF AN ATHLETE
IT'S BECAUSE MY DAILY YOGA PRACTICE HAS ELONGATED MY SPINE, WHILE MOST PEOPLE MY AGE ARE SEIZING UP AND SHRINKING... GOOD POSTURE IS A SERIOUS COMMITMENT NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY!
YEAH... I KNOW, YOU'RE ALL TOO BUSY...
HEY BOB, LET'S TAKE A WALK! YOU NEED TO GET SOME SUN... SOME VITAMIN D3... OKAY?
ALRIGHT, BUT FIRST CAN I READ YOU SOMETHING?
THIS IS SCARY!
THERE'S NO AIR IN HERE... WHY DON'T YOU OPEN THE WINDOW??

Sauve Qui Peut Comics and Drawings, 2022.

Given the Crumb family history with prescriptions, institutionalizations, and mysterious illnesses, Robert's suspicions and mistrust of the health care industry is understandable. It can be boiled down to his baseline query: "What's really going on?" This is exacerbated by the eagerness with which he feels we continually, perhaps naively, accommodate "help" that may actually be a control system, or, in the case of, say, Purdue Pharma, an egregious exploitation of illness for profit. Aline said, "[I'm] resigned to the fact that he's such a contrarian, so counter. [COVID-19] made me realize the depth of his paranoia and alienation and everything. It makes you realize how deep of a thing it is. I realized that I could never ever think of it in a lighter way or in an annoying way because it's such a deep part that I would have to reject him totally or accept him as he is. It's part of his feeling alienated and resenting everybody else and his whole feeling of just never fitting in and never trusting. I felt compassion for him."

With typical obsessiveness, he dove into the literature. He is skeptical of information that exerts undue authority and deeply sympathetic to people he sees as driven out of their lives or professions because of their willingness to stand by their convictions. Aside from the 2022 comic book and a couple of interviews, Robert has kept this side of himself out of the public realm. He briefly worked up a story about the old King Features character Mandrake the Magician, now retired. In Robert's telling, Mandrake, now retired, would have the power to send a ball of light to spy on people, like a remote camera. Mandrake would befriend and help a young woman whose research into the pharmaceutical industry was causing her grave danger. It didn't progress past a few drawings of the characters. Robert was so immersed in the research he couldn't see a way to simplify and present it as an illustrated narrative. He said, "[I realized] the tired old magician is me.

Disillusioned with my magic powers. I just wanted to play the ukulele.”

And he did. He played his ukulele, researched, went for long walks, and drew comics with Aline, and indeed their published collaborations constitute nearly all of his post-*Genesis* comics output—their patter on the page kept them both in the game.

* * *

Robert called me on a Friday morning in late August 2022. I could hear Aline standing next to him, prompting him. She and I had been in touch regularly about an exhibition of underground comic art we were curating together that was to open in Paris on September 15. They were making calls that day, telling everyone who needed to know that Aline would be out of reach for a few weeks. Aline had a mass on her pancreas. They weren’t sure what it was, but she felt certain that this was the end. Nevertheless, they were both meditating and preparing for the treatment ahead. I had planned to visit the following week. They told me to come anyway, that Robert needed the distraction. By the time I got there, Aline was in the hospital. The warmth of the house was cooled with her absence. Robert and I worked in his archives, played records, and talked about the past. Each day the phone rang and rang and Robert dutifully told the callers of Aline’s condition, of any updates and news. Robert said, every day, that he was halfway to weeping. We had dinner at Aline’s gallery partner Julie Katan’s house with her husband and Sophie and her family. We toasted Aline; Sophie kissed her fingers and held them to the sky. Finally, on Sunday, we left the phone to ring and took a long walk in the Mer des Rochers. The dry Mediterranean sun was scorching, and Robert was moving fast. When paths were blocked or even intruded upon by stray rocks, we picked them up and threw them to the side. We pulled down vines and tossed them away.

Robert spends long periods up here. He knows it better than anyone in town. It's a solace.

The show went on. In Paris that September Sophie Crumb and cartoonist Phoebe Gloeckner saw each other for the first time in decades. They held each other and wept. Phoebe had fantasized as a teenager that perhaps Robert and Aline would adopt and raise her; they were her artistic models. And they wept for Aline's *Twisted Sister* partner and close friend Diane Noomin, who, in an eerie coincidence, had died a couple of weeks before after a long time living with cancer. It seemed so unfair that these women who made difficult, funny, essential art were just getting widespread recognition, only to disappear.

When Aline was dying Robert would meditate and try to send healing energy to her being. He said he would encounter a black mass, an ancient black form, blocking him from her. This was, he thinks, a thousand-year-old accumulation of anxiety, guilt, trauma, and self-hatred of the Jewish people. He couldn't penetrate this ancient thing. When he would describe it he would extend his fingers, pinky touching his thumb, moving them in a wobbly circle, other hand on his forehead. When he sits and talks, his hands are active, and those knotty fingers are like thick twigs. This idea of Jewish suffering, of the metaphysical accumulation of suffering in the world, of his father's suffering, the weight of history upon our lives, is a constant for him. Aline was not spared. And then, suddenly, she was gone. Aline Kominsky-Crumb died with Robert and Sophie by her side on the morning of November 29, 2022.

In early December there was a small ceremony for Aline in a local funeral home in Anduze. She was laid out for a viewing in the casket, which was lined with flower blossoms; friends placed notes inside. There was a slideshow of her life, and later everyone played music. The community Aline fostered is now Robert's—the village women who care for him, bring him food, and check in on him. Sophie, too, now lives around the corner with the children. They have become even closer, playing music together, building a new life together. Her strength has bolstered his. People wondered what would happen to him now that his love, his protector, was gone. But he is strong. The years of meditation and self-examination have given him an uncanny willpower. Shortly after Aline died, Robert called Bill Griffith, who was three months "ahead" of him in his grieving process for Diane Noomin. Griffith told him what the path ahead looked like, giving him a sense of order in the void. For weeks he hardly slept. In the mornings he felt her ghost at the kitchen table. He spent December through early March immersed in the endless paperwork that death brings. And while maddening for everyone, it helped soothe him in a way, allowed him to grieve her through doing what he does so well: organizing, categorizing, that collector brain of his finding order, a little peace, in the trauma of death.

And because he has always wandered when he needed to think or escape, at the end of March 2023, he flew to New York to begin a nearly four-month trip across the country. In Manhattan he spent time listening to records with friends, did some business, and began drawing again. When we walked in New York together, he would observe an old sign or a particularly good cornice. He would repeat snatches of dialogue back to me. He stopped for each unhoused person asking for money, chatted with them, and gave them a few dollars. At a book stand in Union Square he got down on his haunches to look through a box of books; he swept the table and bought a Depression-era tome with fine Art Deco drawings. He has stayed curious and in motion. Which is not to say the sadness doesn't sweep over him. I took him to lunch with a few friends; as they were praising the beauty of the Aline-Robert partnership, Robert broke down sobbing, his long El Greco fingers covering his face. I held his elbow and my companion reached across the table to hold his shoulder.

He and I drove up to see Bill Griffith in Connecticut for a night. They sat across from each other at Bill's dinner table, fifty years into their friendship and both newly widowed, talking about being alone now, figuring out how to cook, how to be by themselves. And about comics. They both worked so hard to nurture the very idea of comics as a creator-owned medium capable of any expression, the basic idea of which has generated so much culture. And for both of them it is still wide open.

When Diane was confined to a hospital bed in their living room, Bill had set up a makeshift studio corner so that he wouldn't have to leave her while he worked. It was cramped and overflowing. Robert, both seeing himself and reaching back to the days when he was a Johnny Appleseed of the underground, the editor of *Zap*, and a ready correspondent for earnest young artists, decided he needed to help Bill get back into his real studio—a small outbuilding in the backyard. The next morning, Robert walked Bill down there, looked at the drawing board, ran his fingers over the paper, marveled at Bill's striations of ink, and said, "It's time to get back in here," encouraging him to work the way he used to. And shortly thereafter, Bill did just that.

After a few weeks in New York, a record collector pal drove him to Kentucky to connect with Marty and Sandra's son, Avery, who drove him up to New Richland to visit the old Crumb homestead, where his uncle Rich, then age ninety-nine, still lived, then Robert went down to Arizona to see Betsy Klein and Veronica Vertes, then on to Los Angeles to see Robert and Suzanne Williams, among others, then to San Francisco for Terry Zwigoff, Al Dodge, and Maxon Crumb, still living in the same room, making art, surviving as he always has. Robert Armstrong picked him up at Dodge's in Oakland and drove him up to Winters, and then to Eureka to see Jesse Crumb's widow, Erica. Then it was on to Oregon to visit Mike Britt and check in on Carol Vinson as well. In the evenings Armstrong played a small six-string guitar and Robert a four-string tenor, trading old tunes and ditties. In Portland, they played a raucous gig with a young group of musicians completely attuned to the old-time music, capping off the night with a performance of the Cheap Suits original "Getta Loada This." He wound down the trip back in New York, where he met up with Sophie and her children, who were on an American tour of their own.

Through all the years of his travels Robert had never taken a trip like this. He urgently needed to connect with everyone, saying perhaps it would be the last time. Robert returned to Sauve in July 2023 and turned eighty on August 30. He remains vital, sharp, and searching, and so for him it's not a matter of retreating to his home and listening to records. He is actively seeking out what his self might be without Aline. He misses her. He feels guilt over her. But he goes on. He calls 2023 his "year of weeping." He wept on his friends' shoulders; he wept alone in the black of night. He remembers, "[In July] I lay in bed wondering if Aline's spirit was out there somewhere, when suddenly her voice invaded my consciousness, saying, 'Don't doubt! Stop doubting!' I immediately stopped doubting, and haven't doubted since." In December 2023, sick with a fever, alone in his studio, Robert looked around at all his records, thought about the portrait of the president of Senegal he'd just drawn in exchange for a pile of deliriously strange Ethiopian records, and decided, "You have enough, enough records." Eighty years old, and finally the chase is over. No more buying records, no more pursuing records. Now it would just be listening and researching.

As I write this, the old magician has become reenchanted by his tricks. Now alone and trying to understand a quiet, absence-infused home, he's turned to comics to help orient himself in his new, ever-smaller emotional world. He is working on his first solo comic book in over twenty years. It will begin with a seven-page story about a disturbing acid trip for which he's undergone three sessions of regressive hypnosis. Back in 1966 in Cleveland he and Dana went to a stranger's house with the promise of free LSD. It was administered by a fellow named Pete Cornell, along with a scientist who had also developed a projection technique with crystals. Robert had a terrible trip; he saw hell (and recorded it in his sketchbook) and then, whatever else was visible, he told himself, *You must forget you saw this*. It has remained blocked—locked in his consciousness. Having something unreachable in his mind is an irresistible itch for him. A topic of fascination, but also, perhaps not dissimilar to the psychic mass he sensed in his father and Aline: an unknowable mental area that must be investigated. That is the crux. For Robert, it all must be known. Whatever the cost, there is always more to know and understand about himself and all of us.

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A Note on Sources

This book was written with the permission and support of Robert Crumb. He opened his archives to me and introduced me to his friends and colleagues. Robert fact-checked the manuscript and sent notes on the content, but he did not have approval over the final text.

That said, this is ultimately his story, and my sources are weighted heavily with my subject. Robert has been documenting his own history since he was fifteen. He has written numerous introductions to his own work, given scores of interviews, and maintained an extensive network of correspondents. He is also his own best archivist. His personal archives, which he has carefully cultivated over the decades, were the primary source for this book. Over the years, Robert either kept photocopies of his letters or eventually retrieved copies down the line. I reviewed thousands of pages of correspondence, diaries, sketchbooks, and notes. Robert's "Monthly Calendar Notes," which he began in 1999, inspired by his readings of Carlos Castaneda's recapitulation project, is a synthesis of his notes from his sketchbooks, diaries, comics, and correspondence into the form of a monthly calendar of his life from 1943 to 2005. That document and its corresponding research helped me reconstruct the timeline of his life. But as with anyone repeating stories for decades, the details often shifted—dates, names, and places all shift between accounts. I attempted to triangulate

Robert's accounts, his calendar, and contemporaneous documents, including correspondence from or with Charles Crumb Sr., Charles Crumb Jr., Sandra Crumb, Dana Crumb, and Marty Pahls, all from Robert's archives. I benefited enormously from Robert's extensive correspondence with Alexander Theroux for a proposed, but never written, biography. Aline Kominsky-Crumb spoke at length with me in Sauve and in New York, and shared her diaries and letters. Her friend Betsy Klein shared their correspondence.

Unfortunately, many of the people who played significant roles in Robert's life have passed away. For Charles Crumb Jr. and Sr., I relied on correspondence from both of them. For Marty Pahls and Sandra Crumb, I consulted correspondence and letters; their son did not participate in this book. For Jesse Crumb, I relied on both sides of the correspondence between him and his father, as well as firsthand accounts from friends and associates. Jesse's widow, Erica, did not participate in this book. The story of Dana Crumb comes mostly from her unpublished memoir, her correspondence, and the memories of Robert and a couple of friends.

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And while the music: For more, see Stephen Calt, *I’d Rather Be the Devil: Skip James and the Blues* (Chicago Review Press, 2008), 249. “In the 1920s, when blues had been virtually ignored by white society, the music had actually been far more commercially significant, thanks to its enthusiastic patronage by Blacks. The blues ‘revival’ of the 1960s actually represented the placement of blues upon a white respirator.”

“I realized I’d”: Robert Crumb, liner notes for *That’s What I Call Sweet Music* (EMI, 1999).

He quickly guessed: Charles Crumb Jr. to Robert Crumb, November 1981. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“Putting out a”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, July 9, 1959, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 40–41.

“Youth is a time”: Robert Crumb, email to author, April 27, 2024.

His sole friend: Ernest “Hap” Lenhart, telephone interview by author, April 13, 2020.

He was becoming: Lenhart, telephone interview by author, April 13, 2020.

When Robert politely: Robert Crumb, interview by author, 2018.

“I suppose my old”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, April 10, 1962, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 185.

“[I’m] trying to put”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, November 5, 1961, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 174.

Aside from Feiffer: Frank King addressed prosaic everyday realities in *Gasoline Alley*; H. T. Webster and Clare Briggs worked through daily observation in their strips.

Robert wrote a: Robert Crumb to Harvey Kurtzman, *Help!* 2, no. 5 (February 1963).

Robert wrote:

> I have searched high and low, far and wide for the latest issue of *Help!* I know it has come out because a friend of mine in Ohio has one. I guess this means that another Kurtzman publication is doomed. I feel bad, I really do! If I were a millionaire I’d send you a few hundred-thousand dollars to keep *Help!* going.
>
> Don’t give up Mr. Kurtzman, someday you’ll go over big. It’s only a matter of time. Till then, don’t do anything rash or foolish, for god’s sake!

R. Crumb
Dover, Delaware

“A greatness complex”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, September 29, 1961, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 155–56.

“For Charles, Jim was”: Robert Crumb to Alexander Theroux, July 18, 1996. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“wild ideas, philosophical”: Freeman T. Freeman, telephone interview by author, September 3, 2020.

“I felt he lacked”: Freeman T. Freeman to Robert Crumb, September 4, 2015. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“The jumping and shouting”: Freeman T. Freeman to Robert Crumb, September 9, 2015. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“having no experience”: Freeman T. Freeman, telephone interview by author, September 3, 2020.

Freeman and Charles lost touch: Freeman became aware again of Robert while listening to an NPR interview with him and his daughter, Sophie. They reunited in person in 2019 and maintain a friendship today.

“DISCONTINUED DUE”: R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 1, *The Early Years of Bitter Struggle* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1987), 146–61.

“[Charles] had no interest”: Robert Crumb, interview by author, Sauve, France, July 16–17, 2023.

CHAPTER 4 I Go to Work

Robert often would absent-mindedly: Mike Britt, telephone interview by author, 2020.

“its gritty streets and buildings”: Marty Pahls, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 2, *Some More Early Years of Bitter Struggle* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1988), viii.

the first generation: Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 21.

By 1969: Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 21.

When Robert arrived: “American Greetings Expects Increased Sales,” *Oil City Derrick*, June 2, 1961, n.p.

“At La Cave”: Marty Pahls to Mike Britt, March 19, 1963. Private collection.

“of a classic beatnik”: Robert Crumb, interview by Marty Pahls, San Francisco, CA, 1987. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“There was weird-looking”: Harvey Pekar, “Before He Got Famous,” *Free Times* 40 (1995): 12.

“*Mad* for adults”: Tony Hiss, “The Mad Generation,” *New York Times*, July 31, 1977. https://www.nytimes.com/1977/07/31/archives/the-mad-generation-after-25-years-of-perpetrating-humor-in-the.html.

“oozing with talent,”: Kent Taylor, email to author, October 14, 2020.

“There’s been a”: Charles Crumb Jr. to Robert Crumb, late October 1962. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“agony of being”: Robert Crumb to Dana Morgan, August 14, 1964. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“Robert is very”: Marty Pahls to Mike Britt, March 19, 1963.

“I’m writing this”: Robert Crumb to Hap Lenhart, March 22, 1963. Private collection.

He toiled there: Crumb to Lenhart, March 22, 1963.

February to June: Robert Crumb to Mike Britt, June 27, 1963, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me: Robert Crumb Letters 1958–1977* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1998), 215.

Ralph Shaffer: Shaffer would later create the 1980s phenomena Madballs, the Care Bears, and other pop culture hits.

A day’s job: Larry Raybourne, telephone interview by author, 2020.

“All those guys”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

Robert’s cards were: Annie and Ralph Shaffer, telephone interview by author, May 7, 2020.

“Bob Crumb was”: Shaffers, telephone interview, May 7, 2020.

“Gak! I’ll be twenty”: Robert Crumb to Mike Britt, August 17, 1963, in *Your Vigor for Life Appalls Me*, 218–19.

He closely studied: Crumb to Lenhart, March 22, 1963.

“Robert and I”: Liz Johnston, email to author, 2020.

“It is a vexatious”: Robert Crumb, “Introduction,” in *R. Crumb Sketchbook*, vol. 1, *June 1964–Sept. 1968* (Köln: Taschen, 2013).

“unerring ability”: Liz Johnston, telephone interview by author, 2020.

“I looked at”: Dana Crumb, interview by Robert Dupree, *Subliminal Tattoos* 8 (1996): 32.

“Liz left us alone at her apartment”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“I was very attracted”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“They just couldn’t”: Dana Crumb, interview by Robert Dupree, 1996.

“We think the little”: Harvey Kurtzman to Robert Crumb, March 12, 1964. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“His drawings gave”: Terry Gilliam, “Terry Gilliam,” in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 5.

“I have been through”: Robert Crumb to Dana Morgan, May 6, 1964. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“I kept telling”: Liz Johnston, email to author, May 7, 2020.

On August 5: Crumb to Dana Morgan, May 6, 1964.

“They’re the four”: Robert Crumb to Dana Morgan, August 14, 1964. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“I was completely overwhelmed”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, early 1965. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

Hi-Brow crew gifted: Robert Crumb, “The Filming of Fritz the Cat: Feedback from R. Crumb,” *Funnyworld* 15 (1973).

“Laying there in bed”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

CHAPTER 5 Life on the Cusp

“a lone woman”: Dana Crumb, “It Was My Fucking Life Too,” n.d. Private collection.

“Robert has changed”: Dana Crumb to Marty Pahls, early 1965. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“We’ve both come out”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, early 1965. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

A drawing of a gloomy: “Bulgaria Sketchbook Report,” *Help* 25 (July 1965): 3–8.

“If you can get Sandra”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, early 1965.

“I agree with Robert”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, early 1965.

“That whole hipster”: Robert Crumb, interview by Marty Pahls, San Francisco, CA, 1987. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“Everything poured from”: Robert Crumb, *R. Crumb Sketchbook*, vol. 5, *1989–1998* (Köln: Taschen, 2020), 425.

His trip: In 1973 Robert recounted the event in a one-page comic strip called, fittingly, “My First LSD Trip,” in which he and his beloved go through the many stages of reality cracking open until Robert vomits on Dana.

“When I took LSD”: Gary Groth, “The Straight Dope from R. Crumb,” *Comics Journal* 121 (1988): 71.

LSD, first developed: Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2007).

“The acid experience”: Lee and Shlain, *Acid Dreams*, 133.

“Dana was not”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“hot out of”: Harvey Kurtzman to Shel Silverstein, 1965. Private collection.

“If somebody had”: Art Spiegelman, telephone interview by author, July 15, 2020.

“one of the few”: Patrick Rosenkranz, “Woody on Woody: As Told to Patrick Rosenkranz, 5/5/72,” *Comics Comics* 4 (2008).

Dana’s job at the Roosevelt Hospital: In a February 1966 letter to Dana from New York, Robert reports that a nurse from Roosevelt Hospital has called the apartment to ask Dana some questions.

“As we stand on”: R. Crumb, *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 3, *Starring Fritz the Cat* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1988), 76.

“Before I still had”: Marty Pahls, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 3, xii.

“the first underground”: Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), 33.

“Bob Crumb spoke”: Rosenkranz, “Woody on Woody.”

CHAPTER 6 Chicago

Buzzy Linhart handed Robert a vial of LSD: Robert Crumb to Donald Fiene, September 3, 1980. Donald M. Fiene Papers, Box 1, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville.

“So after letting”: Robert Crumb, interview by Marty Pahls, San Francisco, 1987. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

He says that Dana: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“If I’d wanted”: Dana Crumb, “It Was My Fucking Life Too,” n.d. Private collection.

“Dana left…”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls, February 16, 1966. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“For the next”: Robert Crumb, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 4, *Mr. Sixties!* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1989), viii.

“I went into”: Crumb, “Introduction,” *Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 4.

“I’m writing this”: Robert Crumb to Dana Crumb, March 6, 1966. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“somehow the focal”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“The whole time”: Crumb, “Introduction,” *Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 4, viii.

a single sketchbook page: Crumb, “Introduction,” *Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 4, viii.

“endless stalls”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“Nothing good,”: Crumb, interview by Pahls, 1987.

“reflected that world”: Robert Crumb, interview by author, Sauve, France, November 26–27, 2018.

moonlighting animators supplementing: Michael Barrier, *Funnybooks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 81.

“The visionary part”: Crumb, interview by Pahls.

“psychotic manifestations”: Robert Crumb, email to author, May 4, 2024.

CHAPTER 7 Underground Calling

“A housewarming party”: Crumb housewarming party invitation, 1966. Private collection.

“top of [his] head”: Robert Crumb, “R. Crumb Monthly Calendar Notes: 1943–2005,” 2021. Author’s collection.

the following spring: May 17–June 25, 1967.

“My drawings are”: Robert Crumb, *The American Scene*, program, 1967.

If the stories: This account is indebted to Norman Hathaway, “Victor Moscoso: Moving Pictures,” in *Victor Moscoso: Psychedelic Drawings, 1967–1982* (New York: Andrew Edlin Gallery, 2015).

“It’s Walt Disney”: Gary Groth, “The Victor Moscoso Interview,” in *The Comics Journal Library*, vol. 9, *Zap: The Interviews*, eds. Gary Groth and Michael Dean (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2015), 185.

“Looking at the”: Robert Crumb, “Twenty Years Later…,” in *R. Crumb’s Head Comix* (New York: Fireside Books, 1988).

“I always seemed”: Crumb, “Twenty Years Later…”

wandered out in: He never saw Skip again. Dotson, who had suffered from mental illness for much of his life, never recovered. A few years later Robert chanced on him sitting on a park bench in Greenwich Village, his clothes ragged and dirty, staring blankly at the ground.

“no idea what”: Robert Crumb, email to author, August 10, 2020.

“Subramuniya was a tall”: Crumb, email to author, August 10, 2020.

often sitting on: Marilyn McGrew, “Introduction,” in “It Was My Fucking Life Too,” n.d., 1. Private collection.

“I would leave”: Crumb, email to author, August 10, 2020.

Even the FBI: Crumb, “It Was My Fucking Life Too,” 35.

Thaler offered Robert: Robert Crumb to John Gibbons, late spring 1967. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

Zahn perused Robert’s: Brian Zahn to Bob Levin, February 11, 1975. Author’s collection.

“Mr. Natural—The Zen Master”: So titled by a *Yarrowstalks* staffer, not Robert.

“When I finished my”: Kim Deitch, “Kim Deitch,” in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 121.

“I felt horribly alone”: Crumb, “Twenty Years Later…”

“Points to Consider”: Robert Crumb, “Points to Consider,” late September/early October 1967, Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“On October 6”: “The Death of Hippie,” *East Village Other* 2, no. 22 (October 1–15, 1967).

$30 a week, sometimes for free: Patrick Rosenkranz, “Interview with Spain Rodriguez,” San Francisco, CA, May 16, 1972. Patrick Rosenkranz Archives, Portland, Oregon.

“the budding underground”: Spain Rodriguez, “Spain Rodriguez,” in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 20.

“I realized I needed”: Art Spiegelman, telephone interview by author, July 15, 2020.

prosaic night in a spaghetti joint: Robert Crumb, interview with author, Sauve, France, 2021.

"skinny naked guy": Brian Zahn to Bob Levin, February 11, 1975. Author's collection.

"When Dana told": Robert Crumb, email to author, August 10, 2020.

"This is a genius": William Cole to Viking, "R. Crumb," November 8, 1967. Author's collection.

"does the name": William Cole to Robert Crumb, December 9, 1967. Author's collection.

"Received your kind letter": Robert Crumb to William Cole, n.d. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

just that September: The September date is based on Plymell's account and the fact that the Bukowski story was bootlegged from *Open City* 20, which has a September 14–21, 1967, publication date.

Sales were so brisk: Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963–1975* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008).

The first was to be: Donahue did indeed publish Branaman's *Mommie-Daddie*, though not with Plymell—with Howard Quinn, who owned a web press and printed the *Barb*. When Quinn spotted a drawing of pubic hair, he confiscated the run, destroying all but a few.

When Donahue visited him: Patrick Rosenkranz, "Don Donahue Interview—September 16, 1998, with S. Clay Wilson," Berkeley, CA, 1998. Patrick Rosenkranz Archive, Portland, OR.

"I had never seen": Patrick Rosenkranz, "Interview with Don Donahue—Apex Novelties—San Francisco, Calif.," May 14, 1972. Patrick Rosenkranz Archive, Portland, OR.

They called *Yarrowstalks*: Rosenkranz, "Interview with Don Donahue."

Donahue traded Plymell: Don Donahue, *Zap* ledger book, 1968. Private collection.

"would have to make": Charles Plymell, "*Zap* Comix's First Printer on R. Crumb: Curled in Character," Beats in Kansas: The Beat Generation in the Heartland, 1997. http://www.vlib.us/beats/plymellrcrumb.html.

they all sat on the floor: Plymell, "*Zap* Comix's First Printer on R. Crumb."

(suggested by Donahue): Robert Crumb to Woody Gelman, May 1968. Private collection.

"Crumb lives in this": Dewey Crumpler, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, August 2022.

a group of friends: Among them were: Marilyn McGrew, Eric Preisler, Mimi and Lew Courier.

"Some people would": Dana Crumb, "It Was My Fucking Life Too," n.d., 37. Private collection.

"took them around to stores": Robert Crumb, "Deposition of Robert D. Crumb," August 22, 1974, United States District Court, Northern District of California, 32.

The Schenkers initially: Tom Dalzell, "Remembering Alice Schenker, Whose Print Mint on Telegraph Avenue Sparked the 1960s Poster Revolution," *Berkeleyside*, February 20,

2020. https://www.berkeleyside.org/2020/02/20/remembering-alice-schenker-whose-print-mint-on-telegraph-avenue-sparked-the-1960s-poster-revolution.

Bob Rita, a native Hawaiian: Joyce Tom, “The Education of a Successful High School Dropout: An Interview with Bob Rita,” *California Journal of Teacher Education* 1, no. 2 (1973).

“People came to us”: Paul Grushkin, *Art of Rock* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1999), 86.

unload *Zap* number 1 nationally: Rosenkranz, “Don Donahue Interview.”

“It’s selling really well here”: Robert Crumb to Woody Gelman, April 1968. Private collection.

For distribution he suggested: Woody Gelman to Robert Crumb, April 20, 1968. Private collection.

“cater[ed], after 4 am”: Gay Talese, “Paperback Shops Respond to Trend,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1962. https://www.nytimes.com/1962/08/25/archives/paperback-shops-respond-to-trend-prosper-as-number-rises-to-40-from.html.

Robert would declare: Robert Crumb to R. O. Blechman, May 1968. Private collection.

Encountering *Zap* made him: Gilbert Shelton, email to author, July 15, 2022.

“Robert never pushed”: Dana Crumb, “It Was My Fucking Life Too,” 37–38.

“Of course I couldn’t”: Robert Crumb, email to author, August 10, 2020.

“I’m no Doctor Spock but”: Charles Crumb Jr. to Robert and Dana Crumb, 1968. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

CHAPTER 9 Johnny Appleseed

“I liked Donahue”: Robert Crumb, interview by author, Sauve, France, November 26–27, 2018.

big plans for Apex: Robert Crumb to Woody Gelman, May 1968. Private collection.

Wilson knew Robert’s: Robert Follett, “S. Clay Wilson: An Interview,” *Rip Off Review of Western Culture* 1, no. 3 (1972).

“I studied the portfolio”: Patrick Rosenkranz, *The Mythology of S. Clay Wilson* (Seattle: Fantagraphic Books, 2014), 176.

Within a few weeks: Rosenkranz, *Mythology of S. Clay Wilson*, 176.

“‘Approved by the’”: Victor Moscoso, interview by author, Woodacre, CA, August 8, 2022.

He was already publishing: Moscoso, interview by author, August 8, 2022.

Moskowitz agreed to: Patrick Rosenkranz, “Interview with Don Schenker and Bob Rita,” Berkeley, CA, May 16, 1972. Patrick Rosenkranz Archive, Portland, OR.

Stepanian came up: Michael Stepanian, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2019.

instantly recognizable: So much so that Eddie Antar swiped it for the logo of his infamous store Crazy Eddie’s.

“the other chaps”: William Cole to Robert Crumb, July 22, 1968. Author’s collection.

They’d hoped for: William Cole to Robert Crumb, February 6, 1968. Author’s collection.

“I’d really like to use”: Robert Crumb to William Cole, late February 1968. Author’s collection.

“Fucking you can have”: William Cole to Robert Crumb, March 28, 1968. Author’s collection.

“I’ve got to do what”: William Cole to Thomas Henry Guinzburg, May 2, 1968. Author’s collection.

“Friend knocked on”: William Cole to Aaron Asher, July 20, 1968. Author’s collection.

“Getting stoned and drinking”: Robert Crumb to Mike Britt, June 1968. Private collection, Portland, OR.

She brought along: Nadra Dangerfield, email to author, April 3, 2024.

“when she sang”: Robert Crumb, “Certificate of Authenticity: Janis Joplin Serigraph,” 2008.

“very intelligent, cultured”: Jane Wald, interview by author, Los Angeles, January 20, 2020.

“perceived audience of local”: Jay Lynch, “Jay Lynch,” in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 15.

“In those early days”: Jay Kinney, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Fan.” Unpublished manuscript, n.d.

“Crumb travels around”: Scorpio, “Komics Kapers,” *Chicago Seed* 3, no. 12 (1969): 22.

“Tell Hefner he”: Robert Crumb, email to author, May 4, 2024.

“Allen Ginsberg was”: Robert Crumb, interview by author, Sauve, France, September 29–October 1, 2022.

“I wasn’t involved”: Crumb, interview by author.

“Often I used the stereotype”: Robert Crumb to Bill Mason, August 11, 1979. Private collection.

“the moral text”: Gerald Early, “The 1960s, African Americans, and the American Comic Book,” in *Strips, Toons, and Bluesies*, eds. D. B. Dowd and Todd Hignite (New York and St. Louis: Princeton Architectural Press and Washington University in St. Louis, 2004), 76.

“He might be dramatizing”: Early, “The 1960s, African Americans, and the American Comic Book.”

“The art of R. Crumb”: John Canaday, “Schuman the Human as Shock Therapy,” *New York* 1, no. 32 (November 11 1968), 57.

“Spain came in and”: Kim Deitch, “Kim Deitch,” in *The Life and Times of R. Crumb*, ed. Monte Beauchamp (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998), 123.

“I want a big woman”: Ken Weaver, telephone interview by author, July 21, 2021.

***EVO* cartoonist Vaughn**: Donald Fiene, *R. Crumb Checklist* (Cambridge: Boatner Norton Press, 1981), 168.

The appearance to viewers: John Benson, “From John Benson,” *Funnyworld* 11 (1969): 8–9.

among the first mail order buyers of *Foo*: Patrick Rosenkranz, “Interview with Gary Arlington,” May 10, 1972, San Francisco, CA, 4. Patrick Rosenkranz Archive, Portland, OR.

he traded a box: Patrick Rosenkranz, “No Longer of This Planet: Gary Arlington (1938–2014),” *Comics Journal*, January 21, 2014. https://www.tcj.com/no-longer-of-this-planet-gary-arlington-1938-2014/.

“The underground phenomenon”: Thomas Albright, “Zap Snatch & Crumb: Cartoonist R. Crumb on His Creative Inspirations,” *Rolling Stone* 28 (March 1, 1969). https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/zap-snatch-crumb-cartoonist-r-crumb-on-his-creative-inspirations-191270/.

“Crumb’s ‘camera’ remains”: Michael Barrier, “Crumb-Bum,” *Funnyworld* 10 (1968): 42–43.

“Not only can he draw”: Barrier, “Crumb-Bum,” 50.

“*Snatch* isn’t regular”: Albright, “Zap Snatch & Crumb.”

“I sold 350 copies”: Anonymous, “An Obscenity ‘Bust’ at Moe’s,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 15, 1968).

“smiled and replied”: Si Lowinsky, “Phoenix Bust,” unpublished manuscript, c. 1970. Author’s collection.

“it *likes* being out”: Robert Crumb to Justin Green, February 2, 1992. Collection of the Justin Green Estate.

Robert discussed his misogyny: Dean Latimer, “Corpa Delecti: A Degenerate Discourse with America’s Best Loved and Perverted Cartoonists in the Raw,” *East Village Other* 4, no. 48 (October 27, 1969): 20.

“shrill voice in”: Robert Crumb, email to author, May 6, 2024.

total count to 19,500: William Cole to Robert Crumb, November 25, 1968. Author’s collection.

contracted: Dana Crumb to Steve (S. Clay) Wilson, October 28, 1968. Private collection.

Robert didn’t want to: Robert Crumb to Jay and Jane Lynch, Box Jl1 / Folder 10, Jay Lynch Collection and Papers, Spec.cga.jl, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, Ohio State University.

James Osborne: Crumb to Wilson, October 28, 1968.

where it would stay: In March, Zahn saw the published *Zap* 1 and assumed that their deal was off, so in true hippie fashion, he attempted to send back the original art by way of his friend and fellow hip-follower Jimmy Cameron, who was living in Northern California. Jimmy, who was junked out on drugs, assured Zahn he could locate Robert and safely return the art. He failed to do so and deposited the art with Zahn, who then just put it aside and moved on with his life. When Robert got to wondering about his originals in the middle of 1968, he called Zahn and was told he'd gone to India, as one did in those days. Robert simply assumed Zahn had stolen it, and the story of the stolen *Zap* art was entered into history in numerous interviews. Eventually Zahn read such an interview in *Promethean Enterprises* 5 (1973–74), demanded a retraction, and sent the artwork back to Robert in 1975, which he acknowledged in a letter to Zahn.

The Print Mint's Don Schenker: Don Schenker, "Snatch Zap! Underground Comix," *Daily Californian Weekly Magazine* 4, no. 15 (February 24, 1969): 13.

CHAPTER 11 On the Run

“Crumb is, I think”: Larry Mans, “Jim Morrison Interview,” *Times Now* 1, no. 12 (1970): n.p.

Robert dodged actress: Dean Latimer, “Corpa Delecti: A Degenerate Discourse with America’s Best Loved and Perverted Cartoonists in the Raw,” *East Village Other* 4, no. 48 (October 27, 1969): 20.

“It is said that house”: Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York: Wenner, 2005), 275–76.

“exceptionally malevolent, but”: Robert Crumb, “Cover Certificate of Authenticity,” *San Francisco Comic Book* 3 2009).

“I went from being lonely”: Robert Crumb to Alexander Theroux, September 3, 1996. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“Robert’s really working”: Dana Crumb to Jane Lynch, August 1969, Box Jl1 / Folder 10, Jay Lynch Collection and Papers, Spec.cga.jl, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, Ohio State University.

“a genius, and”: Michael Stepanian, interview by author, San Francisco, 2022.

“fluctuate[d] between deep”: Jane Lynch, “Robert Crumb as ‘Little Ladies’ Husband of the Month,” *Little Ladies*, November 1970, 11.

“sensitive young genius”: Dana Crumb to Jane Lynch, August 1969, *Little Ladies*, August 1969, 6.

“I want to see good”: Jerome Tarshis, “The Reluctant Celebrity,” *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, February 27, 1972, 26.

“You’re sick”: Robert Crumb, interview by author, Sauve, France, September 29–October 1, 2021.

he and Dana to formally decide: Gary Arlington to Jay Lynch, May 12, 1969, Box Jl1 / Folder 11, Jay Lynch Collection and Papers, Spec.cga.jl, Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, Ohio State University.

interior of the joint: Long since destroyed in a fire, though photographs survive at this website: https://boards.cgccomics.com/topic/149997-the-unofficial-underground-comix-thread/page/69/.

“I know it’s sick shit”: Robert Crumb to Marty Pahls and Maggie Rhodes, June or July 1969. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“Let’s face it”: Robert Crumb, “R. Crumb Diary Pages,” November 1976. Robert Crumb Archives, Sauve, France.

“There had never”: Michael Krasser, telephone interview by author, February 3, 2023.

They brought him to a sex worker: Crumb, interview by author, September 29–October 1, 2021.

“Trina says, ‘You have’”: Lark Clark, interview by author, Brooklyn, NY, January 10, 2020.

“I was curious”: Clark, interview by author, January 10, 2020.

“a shiny, tight, black”: Robert Crumb, “Introduction,” in *The Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 6, *On the Crest of a Wave* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1991), vii.

“I was always”: Crumb, “Introduction,” *Complete Crumb Comics*, vol. 6.

***Zap* 4 was so salacious**: Patrick Rosenkranz, *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution 1963–1975* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2008), 143–44.

city police busted: “Zappers Zapped in New York, LA,” *Rolling Stone* 45 (November 1, 1969), 8.

“It is material utterly”: Joel J. Tyler, *The People of the State of New York, Plaintiff, v. Charles Kirkpatrick, Peter Martin, Peter Dargis, James Rose and Terrence McCoy, Defendants*, Criminal Court of the City of New York, New York County, October 28, 1970.

“Dear Bill”: Robert Crumb, “Letter from Crumb to William Cole,” early 1969. Private collection.

“the most talented new”: Bernard Shir-Cliff to William Cole, March 28, 1969. Author’s collection.

With the $5,000: Publishing contract between Ballantine and Robert Crumb for *Fritz the Cat*, 1969. Author’s collection.

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CHAPTER 18 *Weirdo*

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